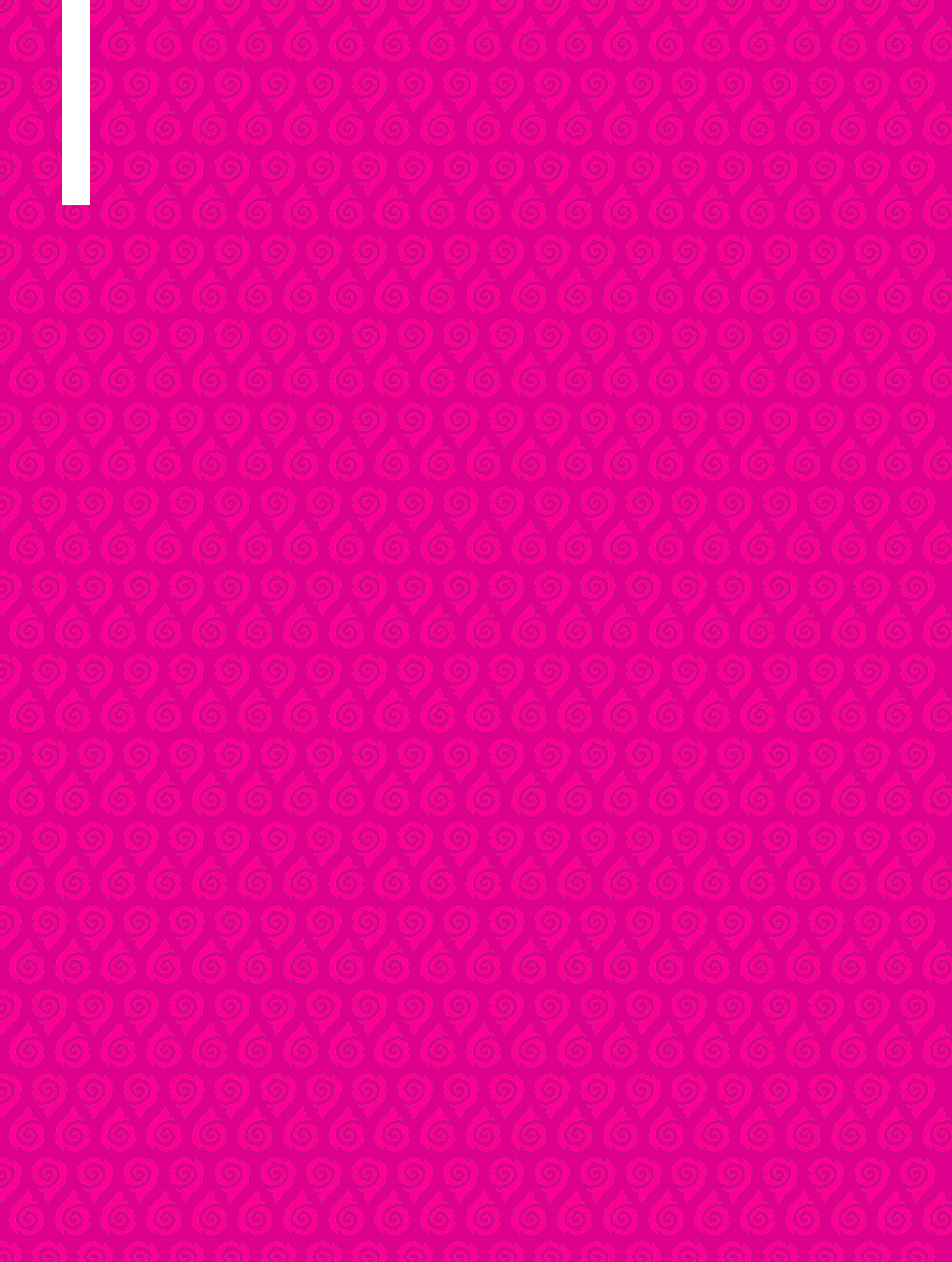


EDGE®
THE FUTURE OF INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT
RIME
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REVIEWED
NIER: AUTOMATA
PERSONA 5
GHOST RECON: WILDLANDS
1-2-SWITCH
FOR HONOR
#305
MAY 2017



In the white room, with no curtains, near the station

A quick peek behind the scenes for you: **Edge** moved to new offices this month. It wasn't your typical move, either. This was a real clearout, a proper life laundry – which, when you've been going for almost a quarter of a century, means getting rid of stuff. And we had an awful lot.

Everyone comes to a point in their lives when they have to let go of things that are important to them – but game makers don't have the luxury of waiting 25 years between clearouts. The early part of a project's life is a time of non-stop creativity; no concept is bad until it is proven to be so, and so there is a procession of great ideas. Then there comes a tipping point, when creativity gives way to necessity. As James Leach explains on p129, at some point, for some reason, the knife will fall, and its cuts can be brutal.

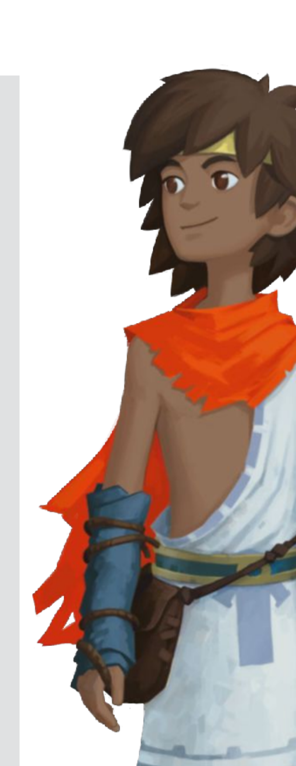
It's a situation that recently presented itself to Tequila Works, the Spanish developer of this month's cover game, *Rime*. After our visit for the cover of **E**273 in 2014, the public were intrigued, but confused. What do you do in this game? How do you fight bad guys? How many dungeons are there?

It's the standard response these days for any game whose purpose isn't immediately obvious, and which doesn't slot comfortably into an existing genre. But the public's doubt soon transferred to the studio itself. Overcompensating, Tequila Works added mechanics it hadn't planned for, and the game's scope grew and grew. That beautiful, mysterious, sun-dappled island soon played host to over 500 puzzles.

Then came the tipping point, and the subsequent search for *Rime*'s soul – paring the game back to the elements that matter most – has been a key reason for the studio's silence over the past few years. On p62 we catch up with Tequila Works to get the inside story on a project that anyone who's ever had to throw away something they love will relate to. In *Rime*'s context, our office move feels like small beans – and we couldn't get rid of it all, anyway, no matter the frivolity. The **Edge** bookshelf may be a little emptier these days, but you will pry our Nokia N-Gage collection from our cold, dead hands.



Exclusive subscriber edition

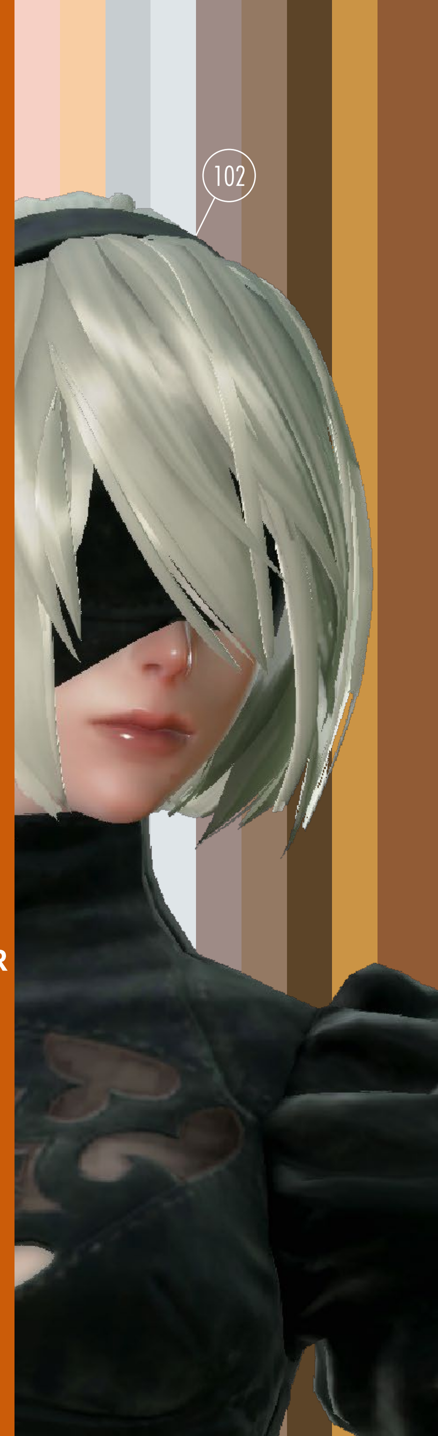


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The library

With new download service Game Pass, the Xbox One ecosystem becomes even more varied – and cluttered

The stock market, inevitably, got into a bit of a flap about Xbox Game Pass. Microsoft's latest Xbox One initiative will, at its launch this spring, offer 100 games to download and play for a monthly subscription fee of £7.99. The day-one line-up has its highlights: *Halo 5* and the HD remake *Gears Of War: Ultimate Edition* sit front and centre on the marketing materials, to suggest strong, reasonably contemporary firstparty support. But beyond that lies a selection mined not from Xbox's recent past, but its distant back catalogue: games such as *Fable III*, *Payday 2* and *SoulCalibur II*. It's this element that sent investors into a tizzy. Shares in Gamestop, the largest US videogame retailer, and Game, its UK equivalent, took a hit. The bricks-and-mortar game store relies heavily on sales of second-hand software – a market that Microsoft appeared to have just cut off at the knees.

The reality is, of course, somewhat different. For a start, a Gamestop employee doesn't knock on your door 30 days after your purchase and ask for their game back. While the 'Netflix for games' tag is an obvious one to apply to Xbox Game Pass, Microsoft's vision is different. Rather than seek to steadily expand the service's catalogue, the company intends to rotate titles out over time; if you're not done with a game by the time Microsoft calls its number, you'll be able to buy it at a discount. Fair enough, perhaps, but given the obvious comparison with video-subscription services, and the straight line that is commonly drawn between Netflix and Amazon's growing catalogues and their rising user numbers, we can't help but feel a little deflated. Xbox Game Pass is not, it seems, going to be the all-singing, all-dancing, ultimate videogame-subscription service of our dreams.

"I think it's not about the number [of games], but the fact there's always something new to play"

Still, **Parimal Deshpande**, director of marketing for Xbox Game Pass, seems delighted with what the service, which is live now for Xbox Insider members, has to offer: during the course of a 20-minute interview, he says the word 'great' 13 times. "I think it's not about the number [of games], but the fact there's always something new to play, and that there's diversity and great quality," he tells us. "We don't think in terms of this number, or that number. We think, 'Do you have something great to play every time you switch on an Xbox One and go to Game Pass?' And we feel the answer is yes, if there's the right balance of quality games."


Parimal Deshpande, director of marketing

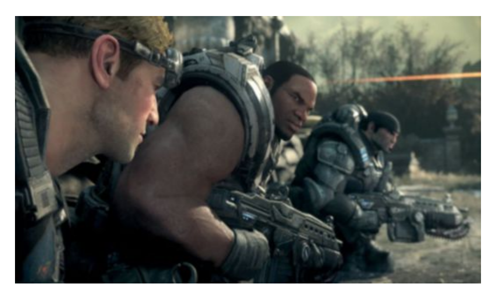


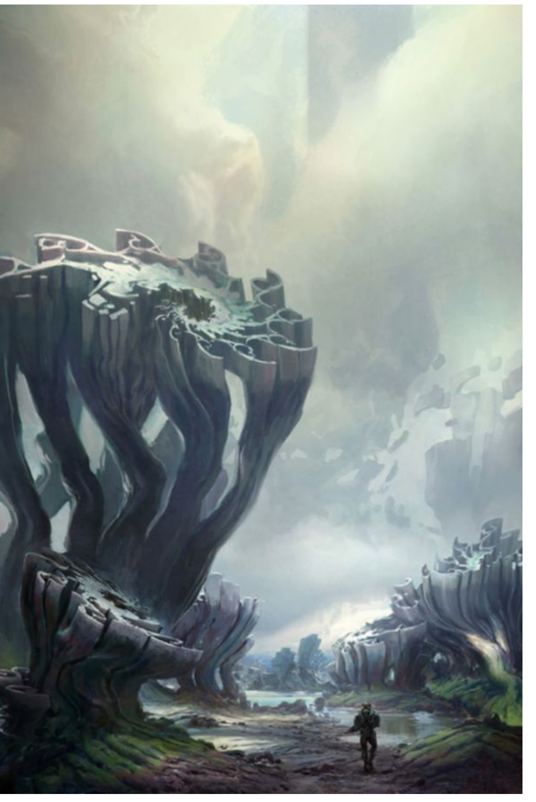
There's a certain logic to that – one of the launch games, *NBA 2K16*, will eventually be made obsolete by a successor, albeit one that will have itself been rendered moot by a new game on store shelves. And there is certainly precedent for it in the videogame world, where PlayStation Plus, Humble Monthly and Microsoft's own Live Gold offer up a rotating selection of free games each month. While the headlines may have screamed 'Netflix for games', Game Pass is meant as something different. "Although the comparison is natural, we don't really see it [that way]," Deshpande says. "What we see in the end is staying true to what our fans have asked for, which is, 'Give me great quality; quality matters', and that comes through loud and clear.

Since the ageing *Payday 2* is at its best in co-op, it will require a busy community to shine – something Game Pass could help to ensure





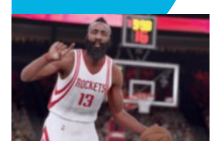




CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE ***Halo 5: Guardians*, *Gears Of War: Ultimate Edition*, *Terraria* and *Mad Max* are the highlights of the launch line-up – or at least what we know of it. As we go to press, only 21 games have been announced**

EVEN FLOW

Walking the tightrope between old and new



In assembling the Game Pass catalogue, Microsoft must strike a fine balance: games must be high-profile enough to attract subscribers, but not so new that they risk harming the sales of new games. Does Desphande see a time when brand-new, full-price games launch day and date on Game Pass and at retail? "We don't think of new releases as being off limits," he says. "What we are committed to is that all the games in the catalogue are great. At the right time, based on various balancing acts, we will introduce new releases after a period of time. What gamers care about are great titles, not necessarily how old or new they are."

So that's what we'll deliver, and what you'll see at launch."

There are benefits to this approach, too. As anyone who's tried browsing Netflix, Spotify, Steam or the App Store with no specific agenda of late will know only too well, discovery is the bane of any digital service. In games, the common open-floodgates approach has made it harder to sort the wheat from the chaff. By controlling numbers and putting quality at the centre of everything – and while the launch line-up may not be minty fresh, exactly, there's no disputing its calibre – Microsoft can offer a level of curation that its competitors long ago sacrificed at the altar of quantity. The Game Pass catalogue is helpfully arranged in channels – not just by genre but by games that are family friendly, for instance, or have been recently added to the service. Those that are leaving the rotation soon will be highlighted to ensure users have enough time to play through them, while a traditional Featured channel will help Microsoft showcase the service's current highlights. Viewed like this, the rotation system makes more sense.

What's slightly harder to get one's head around is that this is the third subscription of its kind on the console. Both Live Gold and EA Access offer free games – the former on a fortnightly rotation, the latter through a steadily growing catalogue of ageing titles – for a monthly fee. Full participation in the Xbox ecosystem will now run to almost £18 a month. That's not expensive given the benefits, but it does make for a murky, convoluted value proposition. Deshpande points out, fairly, that each service offers something different – Live Gold may offer free games, but is primarily about accessing online multiplayer – and suggests Microsoft simply wants to give its players as many choices as possible. "We don't think it's confusing," he says. "We think they're complementary." He's coy on whether Microsoft might bundle everything up for a lower price, saying only that the company will be doing "something special for our Gold members" when Game Pass launches.

One possible, if slightly cynical, reason for this is that Microsoft knows that Sony's lead is unassailable this generation, and that if it can't get enough new users it should just find ways to make more from those it already has. And while the stock market is a twitchy beast, there's no doubt that this at least has the potential to sorely undermine the high-margin second-hand market on which videogame retail so relies. Deshpande is saved from responding to that by his PR team diving on the grenade, but in a later statement Microsoft tells us it is "working with retail partners, such as Gamestop, on offering Xbox Game Pass to their customers". Given that the original vision for the Xbox One included measures that were clearly designed to cut the pre-owned market out of the picture, quite how hard Microsoft intends to work with retail chains is another matter. Clearly the company's 2013-era vision for its console hasn't been entirely abandoned, so much as put in a drawer and redrafted in a more customer-friendly way. As Deshpande might put it: great.

Still, the ultimate goal – publicly, at least – is to offer the Xbox One owner as much choice as possible. Between EA Access, Live Gold and the ever-growing backwards compatibility library, the number of games on our 'Ready To Install' lists already stretches well into the triple figures, and Game Pass will increase that even further. Xbox One may not be able to compete with PS4's hardware sales; nor can Microsoft keep pace with the market leader in securing exclusives. Yet if we measure the two consoles simply in terms of the number of games available to play, things change. There's perhaps a wider, darker point to be made here about the player's ownership of games in the digital era – while there is precedent for publishers, platform holders and licensors taking games away from you on a whim, no-one's ever thought to build an entire service around it. For Deshpande and Microsoft, it's what Game Pass brings to the overall Xbox ecosystem that truly defines it.

"Choice leads to enrichment, and enrichment leads to people exploring games or content"

"Choice leads to the enrichment of the experience," he says. "In the past, you only had one relationship [with a game]: you bought it, played it and kept it forever. Now you still have that choice, but you also have a different one. Choice leads to enrichment, and enrichment leads to people exploring games or content that they might otherwise not try. You can buy a game new, or used, or you can try it through a subscription service and if you like it you can buy it… it's a beautiful [thing]. As long as those choices aren't limiting you, the experience just gets richer and richer over time." Unless, of course, you hold stock in Gamestop. ■



Publishers will likely treat Game Pass the same way as Live Gold and PlayStation Plus – as marketing tools for forthcoming games. *Tekken Tag Tournament 2*, for example, will whet appetites for this year's *Tekken 7*



Game on

Despite wrinkles in its hardware design, Nintendo Switch is off to a fine start

Now that's more like it. We may have fussed about the lofty price, the lowly battery life and the rake-thin launch lineup, but Switch is off to a flyer. Over its first two days on sale it became Nintendo's fastest-selling console in history in the Americas and Europe; *Breath Of The Wild* became its fastest selling launch title, too. In the UK, Nintendo sold more copies of the new *Zelda* than it did of *Wii Sports* in 2006 – and that was bundled. Yes, *Breath Of The Wild* outsold, at launch, the fifth-most popular console of all time.

In Japan, Nintendo sold 313,000 units of its new hardware in a week, putting Switch within 10,000 of PS4's launch sales in the territory. Of course, there are caveats. Wii was severely supply constrained at launch, as Nintendo struggled to cope with launching a new console in every major territory in the space of three weeks. Wii U had a reasonable launch weekend too, and we all know how that turned out. The release schedule for the coming months still looks somewhat bare, even if indies have helped fill in some of the gaps.

Problems persist, inevitably. The handheld's fit in the TV dock is surprisingly flimsy – it rocks back and forth when in place, and getting it in and out is more awkward than the marketing materials suggested. Some Switch screens have been scratched as a result; it's a troubling oversight from a company whose hardware has always seemed rock solid, the sort of thing that should have been identified, and eradicated, early on in the prototype stage.

Similarly troubling is an issue with the left half of the Joy-Cons. No sooner had the Switch hardware preview embargo lifted than the internet was set ablaze by claims that the controller would randomly lose its connection to the console during play. Was it a question of range? Of line of sight? Could it be fixed through software, or would affected Switch users need replacements? One console teardown suggests it is, indeed, a hardware problem: the left-hand controller's wireless antenna is of a different design and location to the right-hand one, and is positioned along the edge that sits in your palm, which may explain why the signal drops out. Perhaps that's why so much of the pre-launch marketing showed us all those rooftop *1-2-Switch* parties, with the console in



tabletop mode, mere feet away from the action. It's the only way to get it to work.

We've not experienced the sync issue, but then we've been mostly playing with the Pro Controller, whose exceptional design includes a hidden message ('Thx2AllGamers') on the rim of an analogue stick. While Wii took its time in building up its drawerful of plastic add-ons, Switch has got straight down to business: strewn around the **Edge** office you'll find the TV dock, a Pro Controller, two Joy-Con grips – one with a built-in battery that charges attached controllers, a feature that should really come as standard – and two Joy-Con controller straps, which have given us our only significant problem with the hardware so far. Awkwardly designed, easy to wrongly attach and painful (literally, in some cases) to remove, the straps run counter to what we thought was Nintendo's hardware-design philosophy, and it seems the company now realises too. In Japan, the platform holder's instructional video on how to attach and remove the controller straps was viewed over 150,000 times in a matter of days, suggesting around half of all Japanese Switch owners have had problems.

Yet such problems ring louder in the social-media age, and only slightly diminish what has been surely the most pleasurable out-of-box experience we have had with a console in years. The dreaded day-one system update, which lasted for some early adopters of Wii U well into day two, was over in minutes. *Breath Of The Wild*'s launch-day patch was in place in a flash, while the decision to return to physical cartridges for retail games meant there was no lengthy install to sit through.

The UI, while snappy, satisfying and blessed with a best-in-class screenshot button, needs work. There's no way of moving save files off a console, for instance, raising the terrifying prospect of losing your *Zelda* progress to theft, breakage or a hardware fault. And the return of the dreaded friend-code system seems baffling after the company let us search for Miitomo friends through Facebook and Twitter. Yet while Nintendo's R&D labs have cause to wonder how mistakes in the hardware design slipped out, there's nothing wrong on the software side that can't be fixed. Whether the friend-code issue will be is another matter, but we can only hope. ■

Plastic fantastic

Harmonix pairs up with Hasbro to reinvent the music game peripheral





***DropMix*'s cards are glossy and feel like premium products – vital, given the price**

The industry's concerted attempts to revive plastic-peripheral-based music games in 2015 through *Guitar Hero Live* and *Rock Band 4* were, in commercial terms at least, failures. The latter case, in particular, proved almost fatal for publisher Mad Catz, which shouldered the major manufacturing risks associated with the plastic instruments used for Harmonix's game. The peripheral maker was forced to lay off almost 40 per cent of its staff following poor sales. For that reason, Hasbro's partnership with the storied US music-game company on DropMix, which allows player to mash up songs using collectible cards played onto a chunky plastic mixing table, seems at once courageous and reckless.

The starter pack, which will retail for a plucky $99.99, contains the two-foot-long board (which, at one end, contains a slot into which you place your phone or tablet), a free download of the game app and a selection of 60 collectible cards. Each card corresponds to a different hit song, split across four genres: pop, rock, electronic and hip-hop. Place a card, and an isolated channel of music from the original track begins to play, depending on whereabouts on the board it's played. A Tribe Called Quest card laid onto the blue card slot, for example, will produce the song's isolated drum track. Place the card on the yellow slot, by contrast, and you'll hear just the vocal line.

DropMix's magic occurs when you add a second card to the board. The game automatically splices together the two separate audio tracks from the two separate songs to create an impromptu mash-up. In this way, for example, you can listen to Carly Rae Jepsen singing Call Me Maybe over a woozy bass line from The Weeknd, accompanied by a keyboard line from a Childish Bambino cut (the list of artists who have loaned their names and music to DropMix is as diverse and A-list as you might hope and expect from a Harmonix game).

With 60 cards in the starter pack, and over 200 more available in add-on packs and Panini-style random selections, there are, Harmonix says, millions of potential mash-ups waiting to be discovered. To understand the sheer scope of what's on offer here, consider that playing the same five cards onto the board in a different order will result in a different piece of music, since the first card played sets the tempo and key. The audio engineers at Harmonix, who have been working on the game for the past two years, have hand-crafted many of the mixes, but the game, which is built in a heavily modified version of Unity, also creates the mash-ups via algorithms.

The play board is surprisingly large and chunky. The positioning of the phone or tablet to one side encourages players to look at one another rather than at a screen





The resulting party trick is exhilarating and, unlike the majority of Harmonix's oeuvre, allows anyone to participate, regardless of their rhythmic competence. "We've explored remixing at Harmonix before but this was a project where we wanted to not only expand the possibilities of musical remixing, but also the accessibility," says **Jonathan Mintz**, a senior game designer at Harmonix. "The joy of throwing down a card and seeing the board light up makes anyone feel like they're in control. We wanted everyone to feel the joy of mixing and music-making."



Jonathan Mintz, senior game designer at Harmonix

DropMix is more than just a mash-up maker. It's a fully fledged competitive card game, which can be played by more than two players. In Clash Mode, for example, the first to be shown off by Harmonix and Hasbro, two teams of two compete for dominance of the board. Each team takes turns placing cards onto the board. Cards with a higher 'intensity' rating (a value that ranges between one and three) can knock existing cards off the board. Players can choose to place a card each turn or, if they so choose, forgo their turn to spin a wheel of fortune, which may allow them to clear the board of the opposing team's cards.

Each team earns a point for each card placed on the board, and a bonus point for controlling the board; the winner is the first to 21 points. The phone or tablet, which acts as both a score-keeper and a loud speaker through which the mix plays, is of secondary importance to the social interaction between players, who face each other across the board. "We don't think of this in category of 'toys-to-life'," says Mintz. "It's face-to-face digital gaming. And we want people to be able to play this anywhere." For that reason, for now at least, the release is limited to smartphones and tablets.

With more than 300 song snippets at launch, DropMix offers a startling range of musical possibility. Also, presumably, a terrifyingly large download. To help reduce the file size, only key loops from the songs are included in each game, rather than the full track. Even so, Harmonix must, Mintz admits, work hard on audio compression to make the app more manageable. The company must be applauded for continuing to seek out fresh creative potential in a genre whose popularity has waned; most consider the era of cumbersome, custom plastic videogame add-ons to be long gone. Despite its blaze of creativity, history suggests that the odds are against DropMix when it comes to whether or not the game can become a craze, rather than a mere curio. ■

The wonder stuff

How remastering Wonder Boy III gave Omar Cornut new admiration for the 8bit era

The Sega Master System's equivalent of *Zelda* and *Super Metroid* was 1989's *Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap*. Deep, complex and full of mystery, this RPG-inflected platformer was on every owner's radar – including that of Paris-based **Omar Cornut**, who went on to work as a programmer at UK studio Media Molecule on *Tearaway* and *Dreams*, at Q-Games on the *PixelJunk* series, and co-created the rather special *Soul Bubbles* on DS. In his spare time he's cultivated a growing obsession for the Master System into running SMS Power, one of its principal fan websites, and has now established a new studio, Lizardcube, to remake its killer app with a beautiful new graphical style – albeit one that can be restored to its 1989 state at the touch of a single button.

Why did you choose to remake *Wonder Boy III*?
It was the overlap of me loving this game, thinking there would be some people who would like it, and me being interested in 8bit history, preservation and emulation. I wrote a Master System emulator almost 20 years ago and I've been writing the definitive website for Sega Master System stuff. So it's a long-running obsession. When I left Media Molecule I wanted to start my own company, and I realised designing your own game is super tough. I won't say it was a cop-out, but I wanted to make an easy game in terms of design, so I thought a remake would be a good way to achieve that, a pragmatic way of learning the ropes of making a business. But in the end, it was twice the amount of work that we expected in the beginning.

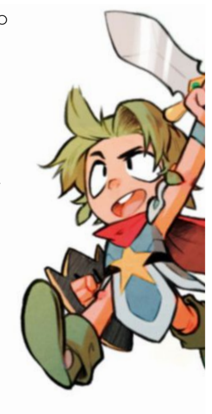
"We've probably made 1,000 changes, but I wanted to make them knowingly, never accidentally"

Was reverse-engineering the cartridge part of why it's taken so much work?
When I started I only had the ROM image of the game, so I started reverse engineering the data and its structure. I wanted to find out if there were any secrets left in the game that I didn't know about. It's a game known for having many subtle secrets, like a specific enemy that sometimes drops something different; there are lots of weird rules and it feels very mysterious. Eventually I got far enough that I could display levels with my tools and my plan evolved from reverse engineering to intending to port every bit of the game. But halfway through it became very painful because it was very error-prone, so now it's like I'm emulating the base layer but I have freedom over it so I can do what I want without having to bother about the limitations of the Master System. It's this Frankenstein's monster: it's emulated, but it's not. The original Master System game is 30Hz, so I had to patch all the hundreds of bits of code that use physics and count the time. I also have to make monsters and objects alive outside of the original 4:3 area. I don't think it's been done to this level. There's a company called M2 in Japan, which is behind the *Sega 3D Classics* series, and they're doing something of this kind, where they're starting with a game and hacking it, but they change very little.

How are you deciding what you can change from the original game?
There's no clear rule, but we don't want to mess up the game too much while we're improving it in many ways. We've probably made 1,000 changes; some are big, some are small and subtle, but I wanted to make them knowingly, never accidentally. When we add new animations we have to alter the timing, the collision boxes. We're adding some bonuses, tweaking a lot of things, adding secrets. It's 80 per cent the same game.


Omar Cornut made 2008's *Soul Bubbles* with artist Ben Ruiz, who is also behind the art for *Wonder Boy III*

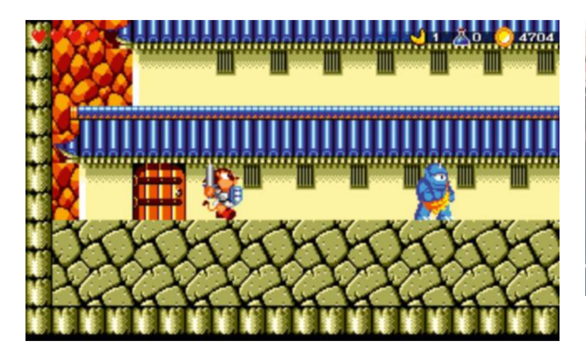
How simple was it to make the Retro mode, in which you can instantly flip the graphics to the original 8bit pixels?
It comes from the fact the game we're making is very close to the original, except we're using a lot of visual tricks to hide that it's tile-based. When the game was originally emulated, the 8bit version was running by default and you could visually render the two versions, but the 8bit version had a lot of bugs because it wasn't designed for widescreen. As I added new data and graphics the HD version steadily diverged. But because the same fundamental game is running, it's all just visuals.



Were you surprised by any of the programming techniques that made the original game work?
It was a way for me to understand how games used to be made. It was driven by the programming constraints of the time, the CPU and the RAM. For example, we're making a hard mode and as we added enemies and tweaked layouts we realised how as soon as you move something by five pixels, you realise it can't work because the way it was coded wouldn't allow for it; this monster only works when the ground is flat because they couldn't code in collision for specific objects, things like that. Optimisation tricks like that are interesting, and through them you understand the differences between old games and new ones. ■

The switch between HD and Retro mode is instantaneous, exposing the strict tilemap that the remake's expressive cartoon art does so well to hide







The remake is so true to the original that you can input your old Master System passcode saves into it and they'll work as intended

SOUND OF MUSIC

Updating classic 8bit tunes isn't easy



Lizardcube's remake features a lush soundtrack composed by Michel Geyre of the original tunes. Cornut says they thought his job would be just a matter of replaying the simple three-track melodies with real instruments. "But when you play these simple melodies with real instruments there's a disconnect because the melodies sound so simple and dumb," he says. So the team had to produce many tracks of layered music to live up to their production values. It was similar for the sound effects. While the original game has only 20 in total, 300 were made for the remake. So instead of a single sound for killing an enemy, now every weapon sounds different.



Narita Boy's unnerving landscapes and synth-driven soundtrack are evocative of *Another World*, but combat is a much bigger focus here

MIXED REALITY

Studio Koba channels Ready Player One as digital and analogue collide

Narita Boy is an action RPG drenched in '80s charm and faded-VHS visual noise. Developer Studio Koba casts you as the titular hero on the hunt for a fabled weapon, the Techno Sword. The title is also the name of a fictional game created by Lionel Pear, a mysterious, genius computer engineer for his Narita One console, but the two dimensions begin to blur.

The game takes its visual cues from classics such as *Another World* and *Castlevania*, as well as more recent pixel-art creations such as *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP*. And those sterling visuals are supported by a pounding synth soundtrack.

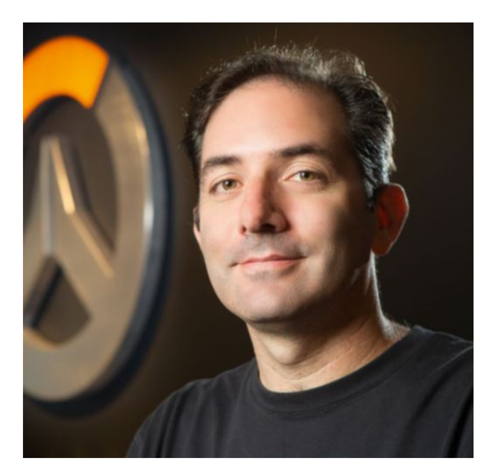
"Above all else, [we want] *Narita Boy* to be a full sensory experience that plays with the nostalgia and weirdness of the '80s, while also mixing in some weird Japanese vibes," says studio director **Eduardo Fornieles**.

Along with some explosive, side-scrolling brawler action, the game allows you to jump through space and time. The former ability lets you flit between different locations and planes within the Digital Kingdom using teleports, while locating rare runes will allow you to return to the '80s where Pear awaits to offer help. There are vehicles, too, and you'll upgrade both these and your sword in order to reach previously inaccessible parts of the Digital Kingdom.

At the time of writing the game is already well on its way to its €120,000 goal on Kickstarter. Studio Koba aims to release Narita Boy in the latter half of 2018. ■

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"People think diversity was the goal of the *Overwatch* team. We cared about creating a game and a world where **everyone felt welcome."**

Well, everyone except for the puritans who simply couldn't accept Tracer was gay, right, **Jeff Kaplan**?



"Passion is essential for all of us at Electronic Arts. If you've ever met Peter Moore, you know that he quite literally **wears his passion for Liverpool FC on his sleeve."**

No, EA's **Andrew Wilson**, you're thinking of *Halo 2*. Or *Grand Theft Auto IV*



"Please do not be scared to be different from the existing conventional games. I encourage you to swim against the stream. **Do not try to predict the future, but just make it."**

Yoot Saito shares the philosophy that gave the bonkers *Seaman* to the world

"I'm not a gamer per se… I don't have a life where I can spend hours gaming. I know if I did, [*Mass Effect Andromeda*] is **exactly the kind of thing that I would play.**"



In possibly related news, Thrones star **Natalie Dormer**, EA's cheque has cleared

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Bombergirl
Manufacturer Konami

While *Super Bomberman R* has the Switch launch covered, Konami is also bringing the explosive hero back to arcades for the first time in two decades. Well, sort of. The company is following in Namco's now ancient footsteps to create *Bombergirl*. The game twists the series into a 4v4 team battler and each of the entirely female cast has a specialism. As well as bomb placement, there are also snipers, high-speed attackers, and blockers. Every character also has special abilities that can be levelled up – examples shown so far include a beam weapon and a flaming sword. Each team must attempt to destroy the opposition's base within the time limit. It's quite a jump: the series' last arcade appearance, *Bomberman Neo* on MVS, only allowed for two players.

The cabinets each feature twin screens – one for gameplay, and one above for spectating. The game is controlled with a tiny thumbstick, which is, bizarrely, mounted on a rigid joystick that looks like it would've been far more satisfying to use. And there's more disappointment in that the Bombergirls' clothes shred when you lose, allowing soft porn into what is otherwise an intriguing spin on a classic formula. It currently has no release date.



My Favourite Game
Tina Guo

The classical musician on working with Austin Wintory, catching Pokémon, and the link between Atari and cheese

Tina Guo is a cellist, composer and published poet. Alongside her own creations, Guo has made a name for herself performing on a wide variety of TV, movie and videogame soundtracks, including *Diablo III*, the *Call Of Duty: Black Ops* games, and *Journey*. More recently she has released Game On, an album of videogame covers.

What led you to create Game On?
Videogaming has always been a part of my life. My first experience happened when I moved from China to America. I was five years old, and my little brother – who was already in America – had an Atari system and we played this *Tarzan* game. Actually, I remember the day I first played that, I also tried cheese for the first time! After that my brother had a SNES, and we played a lot of *Zelda*, *Super Mario World* and *Donkey Kong Country*, and the music in those games is so iconic, so that's always stuck with me.

Anyway, I grew up and moved to LA, and I started working on a lot of scores – movie, TV and videogame soundtracks. It just kind of happened naturally, like everything fell into place. Over the past ten years I've released a lot of different albums – originals and covers – and I previously did an album of covers of music from TV and movies. So naturally the next thing to do was videogames.

How did you choose the compositions you wanted to cover when putting the album together?
We had a hard time because there's so much awesome music from so many games. Originally we were only going to do ten tracks, but it just expanded and we settled on 14. I tried to pick a variety, because game music really encompasses every genre that's out there, and I didn't want it to all sound the same. And then we had to figure out how to do them all in a way that sounds different enough but still respects the original.

The whole process took a couple of months to finalise. When we started planning the album I was on tour at the time with Hans Zimmer, and I wasn't able to start recording or arranging straight away. There were some compositions that I knew I had to do – you know, *Zelda*, *Pokémon* and *Mario* are the games I played growing up. And most of the songs on the album are actually medleys because I couldn't choose just one track. We kind of mushed it all in, even if it was just a few seconds of something [laughs].

STRING THEORY
Tina Guo was born in Shanghai, but moved to the United States in 1990 when she was five. Since then, she has performed as a soloist in a host of orchestras: the San Diego Symphony, Greece's Thessaloniki State Symphony and Brazil's Petrobras Symphony, among others. But she also played with the Foo Fighters at the 2008 Grammy Awards, and toured Australia as part of all-girl instrumental band Metaphor the year prior. Guo has amassed an extensive discography, including several solo albums, and contributed to the soundtracks of films and TV shows such as Iron Man 2, Inception, and Family Guy. She is currently part way through a world tour; details can be found at tinaguo.com/tour.



"I tried to pick a variety, because game music encompasses every genre out there"

You worked with Austin Wintory on the score for *Journey*. How was that?
I did *Flow* as well. Austin and I actually met in college, so we've known each other since around 2004. We recorded it in his studio, which was just a room at the time; no fancy equipment. We spent quite a few days recording the music, and then when it became such a big success it was really a pleasant surprise.

That was an amazing experience, and I always wanted to do my own version of it. We've added more electronics to it, so that it grows in a similar, but different, type of way. I was so nervous to show it to Austin, because I was scared that he would hate it. So I was very relieved when he liked it – and I don't *think* he was pretending because he's usually very honest with me [laughs].

Have you had similar trepidation with any of the other tracks?
Well, I'm friends with Jeremy Soule, the composer of *Skyrim*'s score. I was very scared to play him my cover. Originally it's an all-male vocal choir thing, and we worked in a little bit of male vocals, but – and this is going to sound ridiculous – I also sang on that using a growling, animal man voice. It was me, my co-producer, the assistant… we kidnapped random people in the studio, dragged them into the room and said, 'Here, chant these words in a really masculine voice.'"

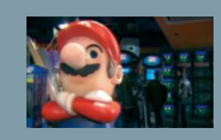
What kind of games do you tend to play these days?
I'm a workaholic, so it's difficult to find time to do much of anything, including playing videogames. I'm more a casual gamer, now. I play *Pokémon Go* – this morning I caught two Pokémon from my bed in the hotel – and *Tetris* a lot. *Tetris* is my longest relationship with a game. It's easy, it's fast and I can play it anywhere.

And how about your favourite game?
My favourite game of all time, even though I haven't played it in quite a few years, is *Pokémon Snap*. It was so much fun! I'm fantasising about a VR version of *Pokémon Snap*. That would be epic. ■

"For every new experience, the more different it is the better," Guo says of the diverse projects she tackles. "It's fun not knowing what you're getting yourself into"

WEBSITE
Switch Teardown
bit.ly/switchteardown
We're still treating our Switches with kid gloves: slowly easing the device into its dock so as not to scratch the screen, tentatively disconnecting the Joy-Cons from it as if the whole thing was made of glass, and constantly worrying about that insubstantial kickstand. Distributed manufacturing platform Fictiv has been less circumspect, however, and posted a detailed blog on its teardown of Nintendo's newest hardware. Among various revelations is the fact that the unit's internal speakers aren't located anywhere near the speaker grilles at the back, and that flimsy-feeling kickstand is actually made of glass-filled nylon – a particularly hardy plastic used for injection moulding. It is a shame, however, that they don't fully investigate the Rumble units.





VIDEO
Nintendo 64 report
bit.ly/n64launch
With Switch now out in the wild, this 1997 BBC Archive report on the run-up to N64's launch makes for fascinating viewing. There's plenty of nostalgia here, of course, especially in the decidedly low-def footage of a time when the only way to get a glimpse of a new game meant heading into a darkened shop corner and queuing up behind greasy-haired men in baggy bomber jackets. But it's the very different perspective on market movements that really surprises. Industry mavens believed that console sales would peak by the end of the millennium, to be replaced by PCs and online services.

WEB GAME
Blind Shootout
bit.ly/blindshootout
Blind Shootout puts a Wild West spin on *Battleships* in a turn-based strategic bluffing game for two to four players. Each player takes control of a cowboy who wants to become the new sheriff – and every applicant is blind. During each round players simultaneously choose five actions for their gunslinging hopeful to perform – you can walk forward, turn 90 degrees left or right, or fire your gun – and then watch as those actions play out. The result is a calamitous, asynchronous dance across the five-by-five grid – which is slightly spiced up by a single, bullet-stopping tree at its centre – as each player attempts to predict the movements of their opponents. Cowboys have a short, three-segment health bar to wear down, while a 20-second timer in the planning phase adds a little extra stress.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

BATTERY
bit.ly/switchbatt
While Nintendo has been kind enough to precisely calibrate Switch's battery to last for the entirety of a two-and-a-half-hour trip from Edge Towers to central London, for a longer journey – and the return leg, of course – we're going to need something more. Enter Zagg's Ignition 12, whose 12,000mAh output contains enough power for two full charges of your Switch, and feeds juice quickly enough to keep topping up the battery percentage while the console is in use. *Breath Of The Wild* may have rekindled feelings we haven't known in 20 years, but it also takes Ignition 12 to make us feel something entirely new: we're actually looking forward to our next long-haul flight.



continue

Switch up
Nintendo's new console breaks the company's launch sales records

Sea change
Sega buys beleaguered Crytek Black Sea for Creative Assembly

Go outside
Health study reveals that *Pokémon Go* increases players' daily step count

Stay inside
An office renovation means clean carpets and lots more light

quit

Breathless
Even as Game and Amazon screw up Switch deliveries

Dogs dinner
Big Star's licenced *Reservoir Dogs* game isn't exactly timely

Bad Link
Link and *Zelda* porn searches surge in wake of Switch launch

Space war
But now we have to find somewhere to store 24 years of magazines

TWEETS
Job applicant's degree offered "realistic experience of modern newsroom". Vision of them rewriting PR while friends were fired around them.
Jon Hicks @MrJonty
Head of audience development, Gamer Network

Zelda, fully-charged Switch & backup battery: I will never be more excited for a cross-country redeye.
Mark MacDonald @markmacd
VP production, Enhance Games

When I idly consider powered exoskeletons, I am disappointed how hard it is to exceed human speed and force with common industrial actuators.
John Carmack @ID_AA_Carmack
Oculus CTO

Peter Moore leaving EA for Liverpool FC makes sense as they both promise big improvements every year but disappoint everyone by Christmas.
Kaz Hirai @KazHiraiCEO
Parody account



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DISPATCHES MAY



Issue 304

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a year's subscription to PlayStation Plus, courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment



PlayStation Plus

Wild bunch

Videogames are in abundance these days, every detail marketed in order to sell more. Knowing what to expect before playing has become the norm, taking away the magic of what it was like when all you had were a few screenshots or a magazine article to pore over. After watching the initial trailer for *Breath Of The Wild*, I decided to avoid any new information surrounding the game until reading **E**304's review and the brilliant story behind the game's creation. After reading through both pieces – enamoured by the subscriber cover art, which seemed to take reference from Monet's Water Lilies series – I knew I was in for something special.

Like an oil painting come to life, the initial outlook onto the horizon is awe-inspiring. Having Hyrule at my feet, with an unrestricted sense of freedom and total lack of handholding, was intimidating yet exciting. The term 'open world' is frivolously thrown about within the industry, and is often quickly countered by the introduction of invisible walls and unscalable terrain; removing the authenticity of a living, breathing world and replacing it with a playground full of scripted events, seeming somewhat predictable. With *Breath Of The Wild* I've found quite the opposite: I'm constantly surprised by each new venture. Finding treasures and secrets not marked on the map prolongs the mystery and evokes childlike curiosity upon discovery, allowing people to experience the game in their own unique way.

> "It's not often games like this come along, that make the whole industry stop in their tracks"

Unexpected occurrences arise: bumping into Cambo on a hilltop vista, eyeballing the packs on his donkey, before watching the sunset on my way to Kakariko Village – stumbling across hidden treasures along the way. It captures that sense of adventure that is lost in many games today. Discovering hidden alcoves and sea-floor caves, sweeping fields and forests – densely populated with such an array of wildlife, monsters, forageable foods and more. The game offers the player unprecedented exploration with a surprise around every corner. I found myself sat crossed legged, Joy-Cons in hand, staring in awe at the TV. The game makes me feel like a child again, capturing that childlike sense of adventure, something it seems only Nintendo has the tendency to do. It's not often games like this come along, that make the whole industry stop in its tracks for a while.

Like Monet's great work, this game is nothing short of a masterpiece.
Thomas Wood

Lovely stuff. A free year of Playstation Plus probably isn't much use to you right now, but do get in touch with us when you're ready to leave Hyrule.

Far out

So it's the start of March, and I'm sitting reading the April edition of **Edge**, which went to press in February. And far from being some bizarre temporal paradox, this is a pattern repeated nearly every month. It's not a massive thing, but it's curious that, when we've had instant gaming news available to us 24/7 online for at least the last 15 years, magazines still feel the need to engage in this charade that their information is not only right up to date, but is being sent to us from several weeks into the future.

And before I sound too pedantic, it's more than just putting the wrong month on the front cover. There's a baffling veil of mystery over when you and other magazines go to press, with no mention of a date anywhere lest the whole act be spoiled. With gradually unfolding and changing news stories, it can actually be pretty helpful to know when articles were submitted, and it wouldn't stop people from reading them – clearly, we're doing so because we value your opinion on



the news, rather than the news itself.

So how about at least printing the date each issue of **Edge** goes to press somewhere unobtrusive, like the inside cover? I mean, come on, if you're getting *Breath Of The Wild* review code in early February (at a guess), why wouldn't you want to brag about it?
Tom Laverack

This isn't the worst idea in the world. If nothing else it would give us a chance to show off how quickly we turn around E3 coverage every year. We'll mull it over, and see if it gets past the men in aftershave.

Tokyo dawn

It's not quite the seven stages of grief, but it's safe to say that it has been a rollercoaster ride. Unabashed hype once the Switch revealed itself to the world. Tumbling disappointment after the hour-long livestream. Days and nights pass by with Nintendo at the back of my mind. *Fire Emblem* Direct! *Splatoon 2* global testfire! Nindie Direct! Much praise of the hardware started coming in, a refreshing change to the criticisms that 3DS and Wii U received.

The games are coming. In the first year, there is *Zelda, Mario Kart 8 Deluxe, Arms, Splatoon 2* and *Mario Odyssey*. Hopefully *Xenoblade 2* as well, localisation permitting. Good amount of variety in there. E3 will hopefully deliver some goodness as well. I really needed that indie Direct, as my biggest hype-train crash was because of the apparent lack of thirdparty support during that livestream. The indies, however, are flocking to Switch, and I couldn't be happier. The best thing about the Vita was being able to play fantastic indies like Bastion in a portable fashion, so I'm delighted to see indies flourish on Switch. I heard the devkit is quite cheap, too, which might have helped. Speaking of which, hey, Supergiant! You know *Pyre*'s local multiplayer would be perfect for Switch?

Then there's the casual/party side of Switch. I love truly social games, and *1-2-Switch* looks more like a variety board game rather than a videogame. As for *Snipperclips*, well, it just seems plain great and perfect for the Switch's unique capabilities of local, anywhere-you-want multiplayer. The game could work on any other platform, but it thrives on Switch thanks to its unique capabilities.

Sure, it's unfortunately not going to replace my PS4 for those big thirdparty games, but I think the Switch is justifying itself regardless. Despite my tangible change of perception of the Switch, I'll be waiting a while to pick one up as I'd like it to mature a little bit. Have more games out, have the online ready, iron out the kinks like having a Netflix app, improve the operating system, bundle in a game to make a good sale and I'm in. It's certainly a far cry from how I was feeling a couple of months ago.

In **E**303, you replied to me saying that the Nintendo Difference was that despite all of the disappointment, those disappointed people are gonna buy a Switch at launch anyway. Well, I think the overwhelming negativity at the time got to us all a little bit. The difference is the same as it's always been: their games are unique and you can't get them anywhere else. It's just that this time, there's great hardware and massive potential to go along with it. I look forward to seeing how the next few years play out.
Benjamin McManus

What we didn't know at the time was that Switch was going to launch with one of the greatest games ever made, which puts things in context a bit. Who cares if the next few months look quiet? At this rate we'll still be playing *Breath Of The Wild* at Christmas.

Guidance

It was when *Wipeout* called me a 'purist' that I first had a glimpse of it. I was expecting an extra track or ship as a reward for winning all gold medals. All I got was that title, but I was not disappointed. I left the game feeling complete: 'purist' said something about me. No, I did not put it on my CV, but it did complement my medical degree and PhD. But later, when restarting *The Witness* to show it to my girlfriend, it became obvious: it was there, right at the beginning of the game, the possibility to get to the end of the game shining bright as the sun (literally). It was the sheer beauty of it that made me realise: I am a gamer, and I want everybody to know.

And **Edge** is my textbook. James, Nathan, Steven, I love your editorials and it seems I have known you since childhood. This is why it hurts so much how little you know me. I don't belong to any church (**E**303) and I am no victim of the Genre Silo Effect (**E**304). I ate watermelon on the white beach, I have gone through the night of blood and beasts, I made Leisure Suit Larry score, I have been inside and took the blob-thing out to the seashore, I walked through snow and regret on New Year's Eve, I stood at the bottom of the nest with my huge feathery friend. I am a well-rounded videogamer and I play games not so much because they awake the child in me, but because they make me a better man. And now I'll purse this philosophy to become a better virtual ninja (**E**291) by practicing my Chi in the innovative *Nioh*-borne – with Control Type A, that is.
Mirco Petruzzelli

Thanks, Mirco! Though if you really had known our columnists since you were a kid, you'd be thoroughly sick of them by now.

Defected

Blimey, **Edge**. I know I said I would have had to copyright my new Nathan Drake game idea but I wasn't expecting people to steal it this quickly. There I was flicking through the letters page and I thought, "I recognise that letter." I wrote it! However, underneath it goes by the name Lukgargnes.
Rich Lenton

Our most profuse apologies for the error, Derek. We promise it won't happen again. ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

Look, I'm in a tank! Well, I'm not really in a tank, but *Battlezone* on PSVR makes the illusion extraordinarily compelling. At least at the beginning, before you have to start driving the damn thing. We seem to experience something akin to rapid hedonic adaptation in these new VR worlds — the initial immersion, a kind of magical teleportation to a new world, is a repeatable thrill, but then we just disappear into the virtual universe.

In the current line-up of PSVR games (a lot of which, it must be said, are little more than tech demos), one can already spot a couple of future generic directions for the medium. This is obviously the perfect next step, for example, for the walking simulator, and I for one also welcome the resurgence of cockpit-based air- and space-combat games. But another evident future direction of VR, which will (thankfully) cater particularly for those prone to motion sickness, is for videogames to become less dependent on the rush and twitch of fast movement, and more dependent on atmosphere and environment.

It was fascinating to learn, then, during a recent visit to the National Theatre's R&D headquarters, that theatrical experiences themselves are about to become more virtual. In a car park behind the NT Studio, four shipping containers have been welded together to make an Immersive Storytelling research department, a kind of internal garage startup littered with Oculus, HTC, Samsung, and Sony headgear. There is a portable wood-hewn mini-set in which you can experience an immersive documentary film about life in the Calais jungle. Or you can watch a VR piece called Easter Rising, which casts you as a participant in the Dublin street battles of a century ago.

In Easter Rising, as in the Calais documentary, the action is on rails, but here the visuals are entirely computer-generated, and you are encouraged to peek around corners and so forth. The National Theatre actually used this VR piece to help the actors prepare for a production of Seán O'Casey's play about the Easter Rising, The Plough And The Stars, last year. The stylised visuals are aesthetically very arresting: figures and objects are made up from polygons that don't quite fit together, like shards of memory. Interestingly, however, one of the National Theatre's dramaturgs, Tom Lyons, tells me that some people don't like the VR piece – because it looks like a videogame.



Illustration kaeru.com.ar

"If you have it on and then you take it off, and you're still in that world, what does that do?"

"When you start looking at developing ideas for this technology," Lyons says, "you do think, 'Hang on, is this a computer game? Is this experience that you're going on a computer game? And where is that boundary?' Of course, computer games as a form of storytelling and entertainment are huge today. I think the boundaries are really interesting and there to be interrogated." And, we might add, the blurring of boundaries goes both ways. Already with some VR games you think, 'Hang on, is this more of a kind of interactive-theatre experience?' And that is all to the good.

What is really interesting, and pushes beyond the sedentary VR game/experience, is the set of tricks that directors are thinking of playing on actual theatrical audiences, who might all have VR headsets supplied to each seat. And these ideas for tricks often revolve around what Lyons calls the visor-on/visor-off moment. "So if you're at a play," Lyons imagines, "and there's a moment when you put your headset on, and that environment is interacting with the real environment, or if you have it on and then you take it off, and you're still in that world, what does that do?" Even more spectacular head-fakes are possible. You are in a theatre watching a play. You are directed to put on your headset and you're transported to somewhere else in VR. And now you're told to take the headset off – "and you're somewhere entirely different in the real world!" Lyons says gleefully. "Which is eminently doable, because we do it at the moment with blackouts."

Home VR developers can't count on being able to pull off such elaborate stunts, but the very nature of the technology encourages fantasy and experimentation more than any other milestone in videogames since the move from 2D to 3D, and maybe more so than that. Theatremakers on one side, and game developers on the other, are exploring uncharted territories. The future looks bright for artistic experimentation, at least until we all wear miniaturised VR contact lenses permanently glued to our eyes, and society collapses completely.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

The child barrels over, as the child does, and after I bark a warning he stops just in time, like he sometimes does. "Daddy's working," I say, and it does the trick. The greatest advantage this profession has given me, apart from the enormous salary and the beautiful women, is the unique ability to stop my kid from messing with all my lovely toys. All I need is just four magic words. 'This is Daddy's work'. Beautiful.

A couple of weeks back, however, the technique failed me. The kid hurtled over while I was playing something for review; I uttered the magic words but, rather than wander off, this time he stuck around to watch. "Daddyyyyy," he half-whined, in the way he does. "What are those people saying?" They were speaking Japanese; the distinct otherness of the sounds, of the people that were saying it, and the place in which they were saying it, evidently drew him in.

Yet suddenly, Japanese no longer feels so strange. Indeed, over the past few months it has become the rule, rather than the exception. So far in 2017, I have played only one game developed outside Japan, and it was rubbish. Yet the others? *Resi 7*, *Yakuza 0*, *Nioh*, *Breath Of The Wild*, *Nier Automata*, *Persona 5* – and it's still only March, for heaven's sake. Everyone's talking about this being the most rollicking opening few months of any year in videogame history – and for once, they actually have a point. What's been somewhat overlooked in all that, I think, is the role Japan has played in it.

Part of that, admittedly, is timing, a series of happy coincidences combining to give the impression that Japan is producing quality games at a rate we haven't seen since the '90s. *Yakuza 0* is ancient, only brought west after the suits finally bowed to the wishes of the series' small, but devout, fanbase. *Breath Of The Wild* was held back to launch alongside Switch. *Persona 5* came out in Japan in December, since it's a big hitter over there – and clearly many of these games were deliberately kept out of Q4, since Japanese marketing budgets can't compete with their western peers (with the occasional, *Final Fantasy XV*-style exception). *Nioh*, *Nier*, and the like would have struggled to stand out in the busiest three months of the year; from January onwards, though, we're all a little more prepared to experiment.



Illustration kaeru.com.ar

So far in 2017, I have played only one game developed outside Japan, and it was rubbish

Yet circumstances be damned. The result of this clustering together of Japan-made quality is a sensation I haven't known in 20 years, taking me back to the days when the startup idents of Capcom and Konami were everywhere, and a hallmark of real quality. Now, as then, I see a renewed sense of self-confidence among Japanese studios. The past ten years have been rough: the loss of global market share to the west, an inability to keep pace with spiralling budgets, and a native population turning away from traditional consoles towards mobile and free-to-play.

Some studios started making games they thought the west would like, second-guessing their instincts in order to cater to a market they didn't truly understand; others turned inwards, making isolationist games that stood no chance of success overseas. Yet the first few months of 2017 have produced a raft of brilliant, sure-footed games made in a nation that finally seems to understand what it has to do in order to succeed. It's the same thing it always did: whatever the hell it felt like, prioritising canny design, immaculate feel, and a hearty glug of silly, gleeful playfulness. Even *Nioh*, with its demons, its fountains of claret and its endless, brutal deaths, hides impossibly cute, dancing kodama in its darkest corners, then has them cheer you on from checkpoints.

Nioh's been compared to *Dark Souls*, obviously, but it takes me back further, to the bonkers high camp of the similarly punishing *God Hand*, or to the litany of brutal sidescrollers that emerged in the '90s. *Yakuza* is held up as a sort of Japanese *GTA*, but to me it is *Streets Of Rage* spliced with *Shenmue* and the carnival level in *The Legend Of The Mystical Ninja*. On it goes.

Could there be a lesson for the industry at large here? Probably not. I'm not suggesting the key to success is to rip up the market research and follow your gut – at least not to such extremes. Not every game is going to benefit from a *Yakuza*-style minigame loosely modelled on an FPS where you try to convince a girl in a bikini to go out with you. After all, my job demands that, sometimes, I need to play a game when the kid's around. I'm not sure either of us are ready for me to try to explain something like that.

*Nathan Brown is **Edge**'s editor. Is it a bit weird for the boss to have a column? Your views, please, to edge@futurenet.com*

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#305

H Y P E

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



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Everything is just borrowed

It's one thing to have confidence in your work, but it's another entirely to think that others should be following your lead. Yet during our latest look at *Prey* (p36), we hear how Arkane Studios is so enamoured with the immersive sim – the label for a loose collection of games that lets the player put a complex web of systems to work in the manner of their choosing, seamlessly combining a host of genres and gameplay styles into a coherent whole – that it doesn't understand why every game isn't built to the same set of principles. *Prey*, on latest inspection, certainly seems to back that up.

We had a similar feeling after playing *Middle-earth: Shadow Of Mordor*, the 2014 adventure that subtly redefined our expectations of the open videogame world. Its Nemesis system saw enemies move around the land as you did, levelling up and changing after winning or losing to you in battle. It gave Monolith's vision of Mordor a level of dynamism and intrigue that persisted long after the credits had rolled, and felt like one of those mechanics that would spread around the industry, aped far and wide: the future, perhaps, of the open-world genre. But it hasn't worked out like that. As such, the sequel, *Shadow Of War* (p42), feels like every bit the breath of fresh air its predecessor was.

Elsewhere this month, however, we find evidence that some borrowed ideas might be better left where you find them. For *Injustice 2* (p50), developer NetherRealm is borrowing – from *World Of Warcraft*, *Destiny*, *Diablo* and their ilk – a randomised loot system. Tweaking your character's look and playstyle with stat-buffing weapons and gear pieces is all very well when you're shooting wizards on the moon, killing rats in a fantasy land or slaying demons in the pits of hell. But fighting games live and die on their balance; for a game with aspirations of becoming a fixture on the tournament scene, randomness is a dangerous thing indeed. They say great artists steal – but the best know when to leave well alone, too.

MOST WANTED

Super Mario Odyssey Switch
Portable *Breath Of The Wild* is a delight, but its compulsive sprawl is no good for snatched ten-minute sessions over lunch. A level or two of *Mario Odyssey*, however, will be just the ticket – though if *Zelda's* design has informed *Odyssey's* open world, we may be in trouble.

Destiny 2 PS4, Xbox One
Destiny's final update, *Age Of Triumph*, is ostensibly a work of nostalgia. Yet it's also meant to cleanse the palate ahead of *Destiny 2* – which, if rumours are to be believed, will come a lot closer to delivering on Bungie's ambitious initial vision. News, we hear, is imminent.

The Sexy Brutale PC, PS4, Xbox One
In the two-and-a-half years since our last visit to Tequila Works, the Spanish studio hasn't just been beavering away on *Rime*. It's also working with UK studio Cavalier on this intriguing murder mystery. Like *Rime*, it's just weeks away from launch, too. Review, we hope, next month.



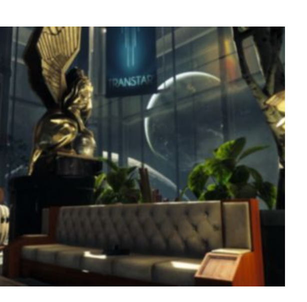


PREY

Arkane's risky immersive sim is happy to take any shape the player wants

Developer	Arkane Studios
Publisher	Bethesda Softworks
Format	PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin	US
Release	May 5

The Gloo Cannon is effective at halting large groups of enemies by gluing them to the spot. Mimics can break free of the bonds if left for too long, however



The first section of Talos-1 that we explore is ornate but vast. A huge glass window looks out onto Earth and the moon

We're feeling a little silly after just having opened fire on a bin. In our defence, it was rolling at us in a provocative manner as we crested a staircase, and to lend further context, many of the other waste-disposal containers we've come across prior to this moment have turned out to be mimics. These skittish, shapeshifting alien creatures can take on the form of any object, and tend to turn back into their smoky, arachnoid form and attack whenever you get too close. In this particular instance, however, our harasser really was just a bin.

It's an amusing moment that highlights Arkane's delight in toying with players' expectations and wracking their nerves whenever possible, and the darkly anarchic sense of humour that runs through the game. Earlier in our play session, for example, we find ourselves doing a series of bizarre lab tests while a disinterested scientist takes notes on our performance. In one test we must find somewhere to hide in a glass-walled chamber that only contains a chair ("Is he… He is, he's actually hiding behind that chair"). And in a multiple-choice quiz apparently designed to gauge our moral compass, we're repeatedly presented with the option to push an overweight man onto a train track in order to save ourselves or others. It feels like a sequence from *Portal*, but somehow even more unhinged. What happens at the end of this appraisal – which is too good to spoil here – propels protagonist Morgan Yu into a nightmarish struggle for survival.

"The hard-to-grasp direction was interesting and allowed us to explore alien powers"

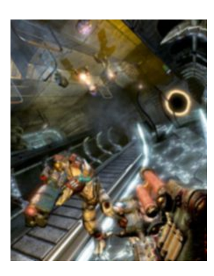


"We wanted to create a big surprise, and to make that surprise as shocking as possible," creative director **Raphael Colantonio** tells us. "The beginning of the game is very bright, and very happy. You travel in a helicopter, there's a nice vista of a city, it's sunny, and there's this music playing that's very heroic and cool. But you get this sense that there's something off. There are things that don't quite make sense – you think [the tests are] a tutorial, but they don't quite feel like one. And so there is this light tone to the beginning, and then we go in the absolute opposite direction to that."

Colantonio also acknowledges that the game's unusual enemy design is a risk. While players will encounter humanoid aggressors – though they won't behave exactly as you expect – mimics in particular are far from traditional firstperson fodder. They leap quickly from floor to wall to ceiling while charging at you in groups; they're small, and hard to hit with standard weapons; their smoky forms fizz and appear blurry and indistinct; and they're rather partial to disguising themselves as office supplies before ambushing you. As a result, they possess an air of enigmatic disquietude that feels entirely fresh.

"When we started the game there were two things that we wanted to put emphasis on," Colantonio says. "We knew the overall vibe had to be survival and an immersive sim, but if we were going to have aliens we also didn't want them to be traditional aliens. We saw it as an opportunity to do something special. The easiest path would've been to go with one of the three archetypes: the lizard men with the laser guns, or the insectoids or whatever. Instead we wanted to go with something players hadn't seen before. We didn't know exactly what it would be; it's hard because a lot of things have been done already. But we thought the paranormal, hard-to-grasp direction was interesting and allowed us to explore alien powers."

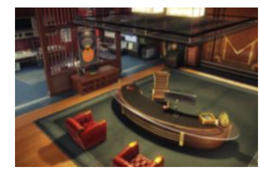
While our unfortunate bin encounter is a scripted one, for the most part mimics' changing forms are a result of AI decision making and the cascading systems of an immersive sim. These creatures will search for cover when under threat, and what's available to them in any given situation will differ from game to game – not least because they can become any object that the player drops or dislodges. While this complex simulation sounds like a programmer's nightmare, creating an assortment of strange alien powers wasn't the problem – rather, it was in working out how those powers would be recontextualised when bestowed on players. ▶



Prey with expectations

Other than a shared name, *Prey* has little in common with Human Head's 2006 release. Even so, it's difficult to escape the association. "I think at this point we've explained many times – and I hope we've done a good job of it – that this is a different game, and our own take," Colantonio says. "We can only hope people accept that and see what the game is. At a high level it keeps the premise, which is aliens in space on a space station, but that's pretty much the only reference. It's a brand new IP, really. In the movie industry there might be five movies with the same name, and people are fine with that because they look at it as a theme, and not so much about what they kept, and what they didn't or whatever."





TOP **All is not necessarily as it seems at the beginning of the game. The real truth quickly becomes clear.**
ABOVE **Prey contrasts clinical, scientific environments with luxurious spaces filled with ornate gold detailing and padded leather.**
MAIN **Phantoms are the corrupted remnants of former crew members. Rather than walk or run, these unnerving ghosts teleport around the place – sometimes right behind you**

TOP **Protagonist Morgan Yu's – who can be male or female – brother, Alex, is instrumental to the story. The pair of you work at Transtar, researching and testing neuromods.**
RIGHT **Telepaths are another alien variant you'll encounter. These floating creatures can possess humans and fling deadly blasts of energy at you**





Talos-1's collapsed scientific society, fancy architecture and fallen grandeur of course evokes Rapture. But the tone here's very different

When development began there was no intention of making them part of the game's available skillset, but after extensive enemy prototyping it became clear that letting players turn into, say, a pen or cup would open up a number of interesting new doors – or allow the player to bypass them entirely.

"We've had to work a lot on the physics, and also put some restrictions in place," Colantonio explains. "If the object the player turns into is too tiny, then you can't see yourself, you can get stuck in cracks, and so on. But there are some benefits to that, too. Falling through some of the cracks turned out to be a cool way to access an area that you couldn't before, so that actually created another type of gameplay that we really liked. Once you have these ideas, it's all about deciding what you want to do with them."

Another potentially game-breaking addition is the multipurpose Gloo Cannon.

> ***"Falling through some of the cracks turned out to be a cool way to access an area"***

This bulbous contraption fires off gobs of adhesive gel that can be used to slow or stop enemies (a good whack with a wrench after the sticky substance takes effect will shatter them), block up leaking gas vents, or even to build platforms and stairways that enable you to get around. But despite its appeal, it almost didn't make it into the finished game.

"It's a great tool, and a great idea, but it's also been very hard to implement," Colantonio says. "We were considering removing it because it was taking up a lot of development time. It was a challenging thing to do because it created a lot of conflicts with the physics systems. And it's a bit of a disruptor, because you can use it to climb anywhere. We had to accept and embrace all of that, but I'm glad that we stuck with it because eventually it ended up great. We really like it, people notice it, and it has its own identity – I have to give credit to Ricardo [Bare, lead designer]."

It proves particularly useful while trying to get about in a towering office section of Talos-1, the space station on which *Prey* is set. Due to the outbreak of alien creatures on board, the central elevators aren't working and many of the doorways leading off from the staircases in this vertiginous space have been locked or barricaded by survivors trying to escape death. Sticking some blobs of glue to the wall next to a balcony allows us to reach a sweeping interior design flourish that's suspended between floors, and from there we can get onto the next floor up. There are other ways to achieve the same goal, but this seems to be the most direct. It's a convenient, time-saving option, but we wonder if offering the player such flexibility has proved a stern challenge for the design teams.

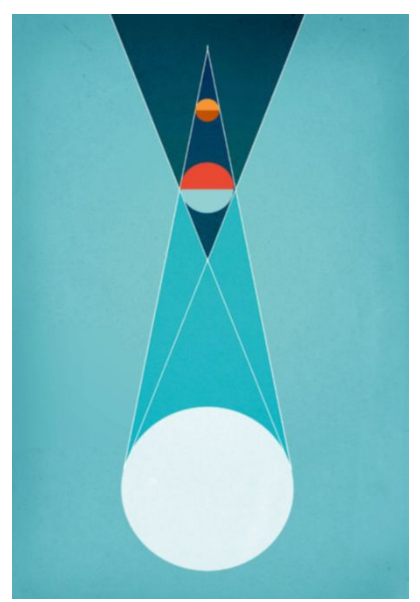
"Our level designers have created an environment that's a space of possibilities – it doesn't matter to them so much *how* the player gets somewhere," Colantonio says. "The level designer will suggest a few things – maybe provide a ledge that you can mantle onto – but they also leave some space for other things that the systems allow to happen magically. Our level designers don't rely on using the environment as a puzzle to block the player, so it doesn't matter if the player finds some cool instant way to get somewhere – all the better for them! There's a sandbox aspect to our level design, and this game is more about doing the best with what you have – and what's available might vary from player to player."



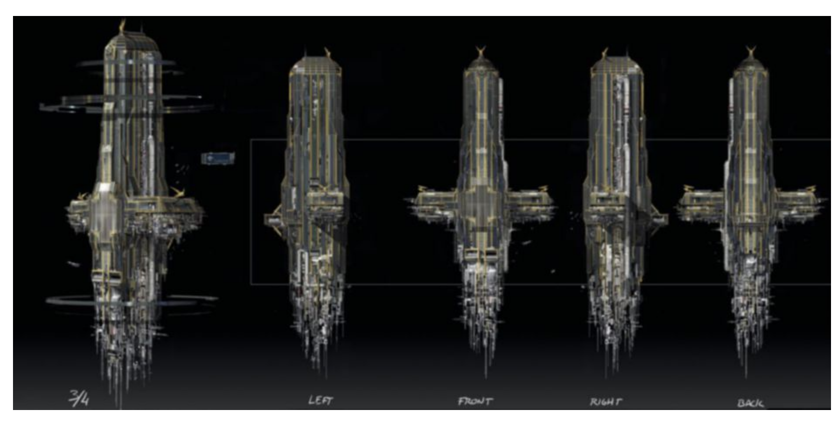
This reliance on, and trust in, a flexible yet complex weave of systems is a central tenet of the immersive-sim genre. But it's also one Colantonio feels should be more widespread. "In a way, part of me wonders why every game isn't an immersive sim," he laughs. "What is an immersive sim? It's really a mix of FPS and RPG, and the particular thing about them is that they rely on the simulation aspect. I would hope, as a player, this is the direction that every game is taking, because that's what computers are for. The more simulated an environment or game, the more unique your experience is going to be. But unfortunately it's not the case. I just hope that, little by little, things move in that direction, so that at some point we don't even talk about immersive sims anymore – we just talk about games." ■

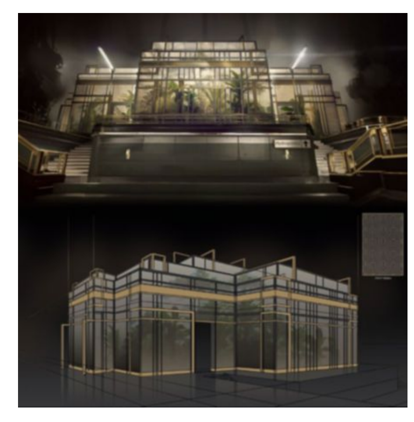


The geometric art work references the ancient Greek philosophy of panpsychism, which is the view that all things in the universe have a mind or mind-like quality





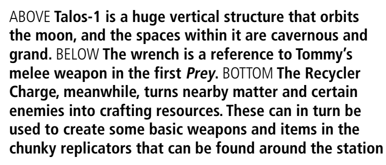




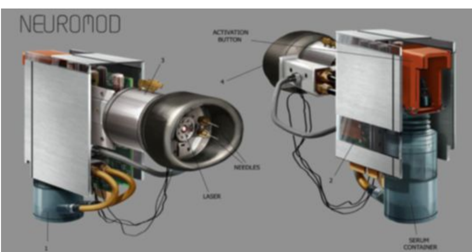


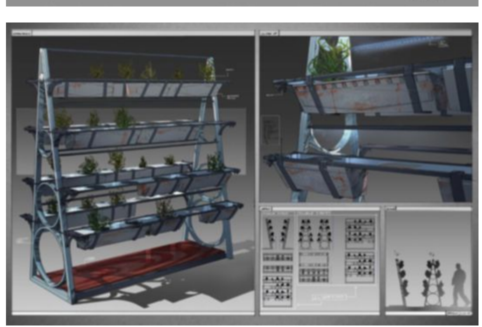
Design showcase

A look at the art and environmental design of *Prey*'s eccentric sci-fi world



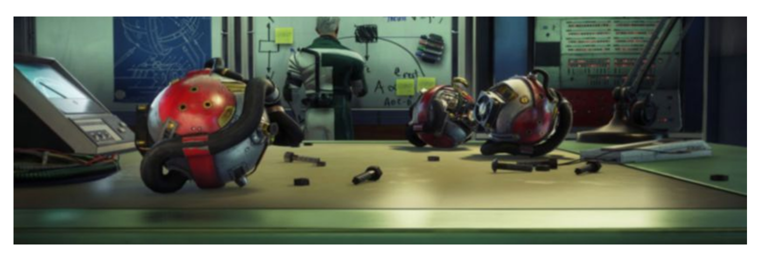
ABOVE **Talos-1 is a huge vertical structure that orbits the moon, and the spaces within it are cavernous and grand.** BELOW **The wrench is a reference to Tommy's melee weapon in the first *Prey*.** BOTTOM **The Recycler Charge, meanwhile, turns nearby matter and certain enemies into crafting resources. These can in turn be used to create some basic weapons and items in the chunky replicators that can be found around the station**





The Neuromod takes a 3D image of the user's brain and then adds new abilities and skills – all by jabbing a pair of needles into your eyes







HYPE

MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF WAR

Monolith's orc-warfare sim expands beyond Mordor

Developer Monolith
Publisher Warner Bros Interactive
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin USA
Release August 25

One of 2014's surprise successes, *Middle-Earth: Shadow Of Mordor* rendered open-world fantasy violence with unusual skill. More than just a good action game, its simulation of orc society demonstrated an ambitious commitment to systems-driven design. Procedurally generated warlords presided over networks of lieutenants who you were free to assassinate, sabotage, or convert to your side. Each climactic kill was the result of hours of strategic play, and the characters that you bested – or who managed to kill you – would remember your encounters and return with new traits, strengths and weaknesses as a result. The Nemesis system was the highlight of the game, and for the sequel Monolith is rolling it out across a stretch of territory that extends far beyond Mordor's borders.

"The things that worked were the Nemesis system and the combat," design director **Michael de Plater** tells us. "The things that didn't work were the scale and payoff of the story, and because we're so combat focused, there was a level of repetition."

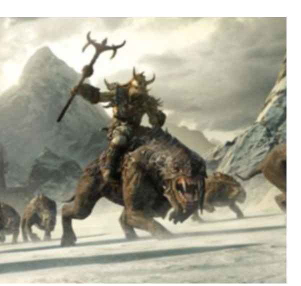
Addressing these issues means escalation across the board. *Shadow Of War* sees our avenging ranger Talion return from Mount Doom as the Bright Lord, armed with a brand-new Ring Of Power and with his sights set squarely on Sauron himself. Monolith treats Tolkien with the violent exuberance of a puppy laying into a new chew toy: there's a lot of love on show, but it's also a mauling. Talion himself is the ultimate act of fan fiction, a half-ranger, half-ghost, half-elf, orc-warboss uber-warrior who smashes straight through Tolkien's fondness for meekness.

Though scholars of the Silmarillion may scoff at what Monolith is doing with (and to) Middle-earth, its commitment to turning every aspect of Lord Of The Rings up to 11 yields entertaining results. We're shown a mid-game siege scenario, with the Bright Lord's army and orc lieutenants lined up ready to take on a vast fantasy fortress ruled by a flamethrower-wielding troll overlord. Walls are climbed, battlements fought over and doors breached as armies of orcs clash on the ground. The minimap is a mess of allies and enemies as Talion's melee prowess, bullet-time archery, explosive magic, teleport strikes and new ability to summon mounts are chained together in a giddy demonstration of freedom and power.

An inner door is breached, revealing a trap: a drake, trapped inside a siege engine, whose fiery breath incinerates a portion of Talion's host. Yes, you read that right – a dragon in a box. Talion flanks the gatehouse and destroys the drake's cage before mounting it and flying off around the fortress to launch strafing ▶



Michael de Plater, design director



Mounts are more numerous and more versatile, able to scale walls and quickly bypass enemy defences



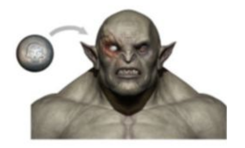
ABOVE **In our demo, drake riding allows Talion to lay waste to elevated defences. It's not clear if flight will be an option for exploring the open world, or if access to draconic mounts will be limited to specific set-pieces.** LEFT **Cutscenes bookend major battles and are used to highlight specific moments. These star characters are drawn from the Nemesis system: in this example, a new warlord chosen by Talion looks out over a captured fortress**

ABOVE **Fear of fire is an example of a randomly-assigned trait that might swing the outcome of a particular encounter. It could prove key to defeating a tough enemy, but it's just as likely to have an effect on your own followers.**
RIGHT **The scale of these climactic encounters is impressive. Talion isn't expected to fight entire battles by himself, but instead focuses on key objectives as allies handle gatehouses and inner walls. This might mean assassinating a lieutenant or detonating a pre-placed trap**













The appearance of your nemeses and followers changes based on their standing, tribal affiliation, and experiences in combat

runs against the remaining defenders. It's loud, spectacular and extremely silly: LOTR rendered in the style of a power-metal album cover. Somewhere, presumably, an Oxford scholar spits tea over their copy of Beowulf.

This sequence offers plenty of hints at *Shadow Of War*'s underlying intelligence, however. A deeper and more reactive Nemesis system powers every part of the siege. The defences and decor of the fortress (including that dragon in a box) are derived from its owner's procedurally generated penchant for fire; a different opponent may field different defences depending on their personality.

The first miniboss Talion encounters is, as it happens, one of his former converts who happened to die on a mission. "You left me to die," he spits, before revealing that Sauron not only resurrected him but also granted him the power to nullify some of Talion's abilities. He later ambushes the player for a second time, only to be shot through the eye by an orc sniper that Talion converted and snuck into the fortress ahead of the siege. All of this is cinematically presented and systems-driven, and all of it is intended to provide a different narrative for each player.

"People have put a lot of effort, for good reason, into followers, allies and companions," de Plater says. "But a lot of your verbs of interaction in the game, the buttons you're pushing, are interactions with enemies. So it seemed to make a lot of sense to put that effort into those relationships, which are at the core of your experience."

Shadow Of War takes what would normally be thought of as a dynamic difficulty system and applies it to storylines. Your actions are tallied up and weighted, with the game able to keep track of who you've killed, which orc tribes you have favoured, who you have abandoned or lost along the way, and how much you've died. This information is used to push the Nemesis system into delivering more surprising and dramatic moments.

"Last time we had orcs who had a trait called The Humiliator," de Plater explains. "Every time they killed you, they wouldn't finish you off – they'd turn and walk away. That was cool sometimes, but now we can be deliberate about when that's happening. If it's going to be a better story for you to not die in the moment, that's when he'll do it.

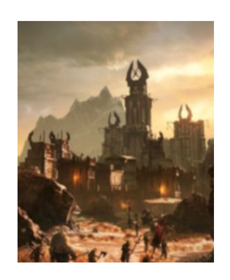
"The goal is to generate the best stories. If someone's dying too much, a good story is to have someone save you." That could be based on dynamic factors in the open world, as in the case of the sniper who helps based on proximity to Talion. Or in some cases it's something the player controls. Lieutenants can be assigned as bodyguards, and these can be summoned with a button press. During an extended fight with the fortress' overlord, for example, the arrival of an ally on a flame-resistant mount proves decisive.

In our demo, that ally is subsequently chosen to rule in Talion's name. This choice affects the bonuses that the player earns from the fortress, as well as altering the nature of the open-world zone that surrounds it. *Shadow Of War* will be comprised of many of these zones, each with their own fortress and a society of orcs. The territory we're shown is vast, stretching from the Sea of Núrnen in the south to Minas Tirith to the west.

"If someone's dying too much, a good story is to have someone save you"

"Ultimately, your goal within Mordor is turning Mordor against itself," de Plater says, "keeping it in this state of perpetual warfare." As the Bright Lord's territory expands, Sauron will launch counter-attacks; fortresses can be retaken and converted orcs can learn to resist Talion's influence. While a linear plot will drive the core of the game and provide its conclusion, this map-wide push and pull will continue long after the campaign ends. If you wish, you can build up your power, contest Sauron and explore the wrinkles of the Nemesis system for as long as you want.

Five months from launch, *Shadow Of War* already intrigues. While caution is warranted – planned demos are never the most reliable showcase of dynamic systems – Monolith has successfully executed a design like this before. "I think sequels in videogames are sometimes easier," de Plater says. "Things are so complex and hard that you're going to leave a lot of stuff on the table on the first one. Number two is often the fully realised version of the ideas that you had in your head." ■



Your precious

As Talion's moveset expands and the world around him grows larger, so does *Shadow Of War* build out its RPG credentials. A much deeper loot system is promised, with slain characters dropping powerful pieces of armour that provide Talion with some of the same traits previously granted to his orc opponents. For example, we're shown a piece of high-level Rohirrim armour that grants immunity to poison. Given that orc bosses typically have traits that accentuate different kinds of damage, building out your armoury to counter them is another way in which players can prepare for the game's most difficult battles. While loot in and of itself is not a revolutionary concept, it gains new significance in the context of the Nemesis system.



H | Y
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DIRT 4

Blending Dirt Rally's hardcore sim credentials with a gentler learning curve

Developer/publisher	Codemasters
Format	PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin	UK
Release	June 9



There's a Dirt Academy for learning basic and advanced rally-driving techniques. After that, you can plunge into a career mode that has been freed from the approximated difficulty curve of games that feature real-world circuits ▶





ABOVE **We're let loose in all of the five locations that will feature in the finished game – Australia, Spain, Michigan, Sweden and Wales. Some are further along than others, but visual effects such as dust clouds and car damage are already looking stunning.** TOP RIGHT **The tight pack racing of rallycross is a pointed contrast to rally driving. A wide range of tracks and vehicles – including a ridiculous Crosskart – make for a considerably expanded mode.** MAIN **Opposition AI is still a little aggressive when we play – a serious problem in *Rally*. Codemasters promises that there will be ways to tune AI drivers so that they're less suicidal, but we'd prefer a challenge without unrealistic shunting.** BELOW LEFT **Pro buggies are lighter and more forgiving than trucks, but you'll get a workout just trying to hold a straight line on Landrush mode's undulating circuits.** BELOW RIGHT ***Dirt 4* feels a touch faster than *Rally*, with a noticeable improvement in your sense of contact with each type of road surface**







We'll admit to wincing a little when *Dirt 4* was announced in January. *Dirt Rally*, released last year, was an uncompromising, snarling return to Codemasters' racing roots that entirely dispensed with the series' long-running grabs for mainstream success. It spat anyone who didn't understand throttle steering and load transfer violently into the verge. So talk of a more approachable *Dirt* game that also encompasses a partial return to the brash American motorsports of former entries felt like an unfortunate backwards step.

When we first sit down with the game, during a visit to Codemasters' Southam HQ, our fears appear to have been justified. We barrel through an unfamiliar course and set some leading split times, despite rolling the car cutting a corner. We politely smile at the devs who are sat in with us and let them know that it feels... *nice*. And it does: the car is fun to shake through the turns, corners feel fast, and there's a surprisingly buttery feel to the handling that recalls the accessibility of the earlier games. It's bold and enjoyable, but it all feels a bit muted in the wake of *Rally*.



Knowingly, our hosts change the handling model to 'simulation', switch off all the driving aids, and flick transmission to manual. It's a revelation. Now we can sense exactly where all four contact patches are, and what they're doing. Load transfer works perfectly as we trail brake into corners before lifting off and letting the car go sideways, then flick the nose in the other direction to tackle the next turn. Every change in camber and deformation on the track must be accounted for, as the car's attitude continually shifts with each violent landing or adjustment in direction. All of this and we're not even using a wheel. The unyielding spirit of *Rally* is still very much intact, then. Now, however, there's an alternative option for players put off by such a daunting challenge.

This shored-up handling model finds its way into the returning Rallycross mode, too, which continues to hold the official FIA World Rallycross licence. Lydden Hill, Holjes and Hell remain, but are joined by new tracks in France and Portugal. The way the cars handle on these tarmac-and-dirt mixtures is remarkable, and tackling them in anger from the cockpit of a WRX Supercar provides some of the game's most absorbing challenges.

Landrush mode is a more controversial addition, but also benefits hugely from *Dirt 4*'s meaty, no-nonsense sim handling. The bouncy, 900bhp barges at its centre are ridiculous creations, and require a shift in driving style to hustle around Codemasters' unofficial but well-designed circuits. It's a physically exhausting, grin-inducing sideline to the other two more precision-focused disciplines, and is presented entirely free from the dudebro Americanisms that have come to define the series in the past – helped, in no small part, by the presence of US rally and rallycross driver Jen Horsey.

While the game's rallycross tracks are official, its rally stages are not. *Rally*'s spectacular recreations of official stages are all absent – a result of *Gran Turismo* acquiring the sole rights to Pikes Peak and the official *WRC* games controlling the rest – and have been replaced by a near-unlimited supply of procedurally generated tracks. But we're happy to report that Codemasters' tech works spectacularly: none of the dozens of procedural tracks (created via Your Stage, which uses sliders to define length and complexity) that we work our way through feels underwhelming or thrown together. Tracks are generated quickly, and we would struggle to distinguish them from hand-designed courses in a blind test. Rally driving isn't about memorising corners and braking points, but is instead an instinctive discipline in which you rely on pace notes, courage, and overworked vehicle components. Your Stage perfectly encapsulates that spirit, and also means that the career mode exhibits a gentler, more curated learning curve.

There's still some time left in the staging area, of course, but *Dirt 4* already feels like a continuation of *Rally*'s astonishing pedigree, rather than a compromise. ■

The car's attitude continually shifts with each violent landing or adjustment in direction



World stage

While Your Stage (irritatingly styled Your St4ge in-game) is capable of so many permutations that the team gave up trying to count them all, you're still able to share particularly good creations with friends and set them challenges. While we are yet to see the process of sharing in action, if Codemasters can make it as slick as track generation, *Dirt 4* could prove to be a debilitatingly moreish online distraction. Traditional online play will, meanwhile, be possible via the Rallycross and Landrush events.





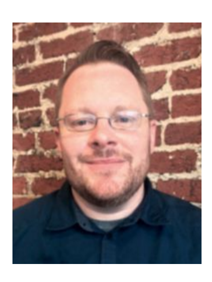
HYPE

INJUSTICE 2

Can a fighting game survive the effects of a random loot system?

Developer	NetherRealm Studios
Publisher	Warner Bros
Format	PS4, Xbox One
Origin	US
Release	May 16

Each of the 20 colour-scheme shaders that can be applied to weapons and armour have been, the studio claims, mined from DC comic-book history, to ensure a certain degree of consistency between game and canon


Brian Goodman, marketing games manager, NetherRealm Studios

The great and seemingly irreconcilable challenge for fighting-game makers is how to allow newcomers to feel briskly competent at a game while simultaneously affording the aficionados with sufficient depth and nuance. NetherRealm Studios' output skews toward the former group. There are no complicated SNK-style joystick incantations in its previous title *Mortal Kombat X*. Likewise, in *Injustice 2*, the studio's second DC-universe fighting game, even the most demanding special moves need only a few directional taps before they explode across the screen.

The game's chances at earning a slot in a major fighting-game tournament may be stymied further by a new and labyrinthine gear system. At the end of each match you're awarded with random loot, typically pieces of armour and weaponry that can be used to improve or customise the playstyle of your hero. Each of the characters has four slots for armour and one for an accessory. These pieces have their own buffs and stat upgrades that are spread across four attributes: strength, defence, health and abilities (for example, you may choose to equip Batman with a special batarang, or focus on parries and evasions).

"We're always trying to accomplish something that's accessible right out of the box"



Each piece of armour, of which there are dozens per character, comes with no less than 20 colour schemes. The blend of shaders and buffs will ensure that no two characters that meet online are entirely alike. Accessories change the look and feel of the weaponry, adding, for example, knots and protrusions to Swamp Thing's club. As well as a weapon's look, these asset swaps also alter its statistical attributes – which is, as any fighting-game designer will tell you, a balancing nightmare.

"We do have a fully balanced mode intended for competitive play. Players can carry over visuals of the gear system, but stats are flattened so that both players are on an even playing field," says NetherRealm's **Brian Goodman**. This will be an online mode, as well as an offline option for tournament use. "For online play we have a system that will artificially match players of similar stats."

To further complicate the system, individual characters can be levelled up as you progress through the game's various play modes, which, in addition to the main story, include so-called Multiverses – shorter campaigns that are subject to special rules and restrictions (some of which will be delivered as timed events). Online, character levels will be mitigated, Goodman claims, so that a level 15 Batman will be able to face-off against a level five Harley Quinn without the result being a foregone conclusion. The gear and its accompanying stats, however, will remain present, so that there is an advantage to the player who has been playing for longer, unless their opponent has been particularly lucky and acquired powerful gear early on.

These are somewhat parallel issues to those being faced by *Marvel Vs Capcom Infinite*, which uses a gem system to allow players to customise and alter the movesets of classic characters. But in *Injustice 2*, the potential gulf between a high-level character with top-tier gear and a newcomer is far greater.

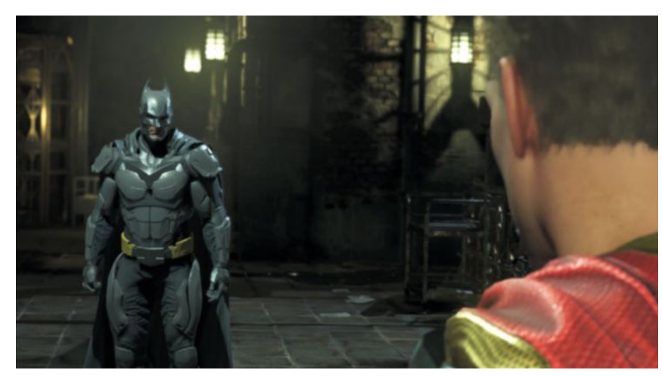
The way in which gear is encountered is far from straightforward, too. Some gear will drop randomly, post match, throughout every mode (these items can even be equipped in the aftermath screen). *Overwatch*-style loot crates, known as Mother Boxes, are awarded to you when you complete a Multiverse event. The more successful you were in the event, the higher the level of the box's contents. You earn in-game currency through play, which can be used to buy Mother Boxes outright, while you also earn special loot via daily challenges. For a game that prides itself on accessibility, the mixture of randomised and directed reward systems is a little bewildering.

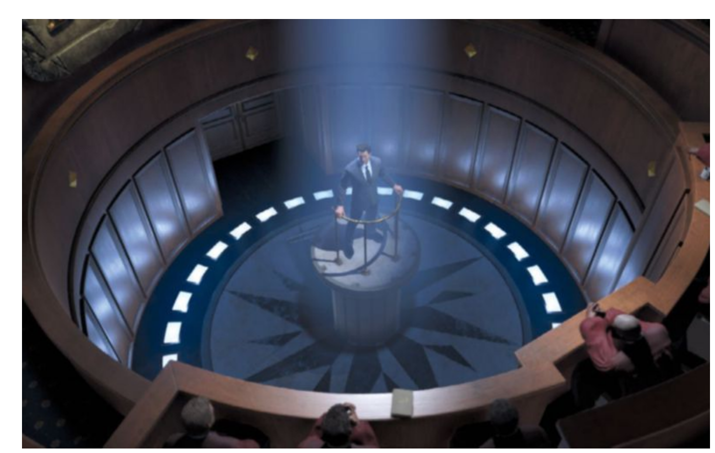
"I think at this point NetherRealm Studios has established its style, both in terms of a fighting game and a hyper-real aesthetic," Goodman says. "We're always trying to accomplish something that's accessible right out of the box, so anyone can do cool things, but we also want to make sure there's depth there." It's an ambition that *Injustice 2* may struggle to meet, its simplistic core nestled inside an overly complex superstructure. ■



Procedurally accented

There is, according to Goodman, an inestimable amount of loot in the game. "The way that it's generated means there are hundreds of items and thousands of permutations of each of those items for each individual character," he says. "Some of it is procedurally generated, so it's really unlimited in terms of how many different pieces can create an arm piece or a head piece." In truth, the loot isn't procedurally generated so much as the result of a random number generator. The specific stats of each piece of armour are randomised, but fall within a predetermined range, so you can receive the same piece of armour with a clutch of different potential stat modifiers.

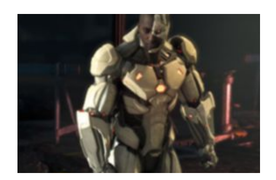




TOP **Every character starts with the same base-level gear, which has no buffs or stat upgrades. These are added to almost as soon as you start playing, however, through drops at the post-match results screen.**
RIGHT **Some gear comes in sets, and will grant overall buffs when every item in the set is equipped. Equip Batman with the Kryptonite set, for example, and the range of his Batswarm attack increases, making it easier to knock a foe through the stage scenery.**
BELOW **NetherRealm worked with DC on the character selection, choosing options based on what would best serve the story and provide a good range of fighting styles – and, presumably, whichever characters DC wants to promote alongside its cinematic scheduling**





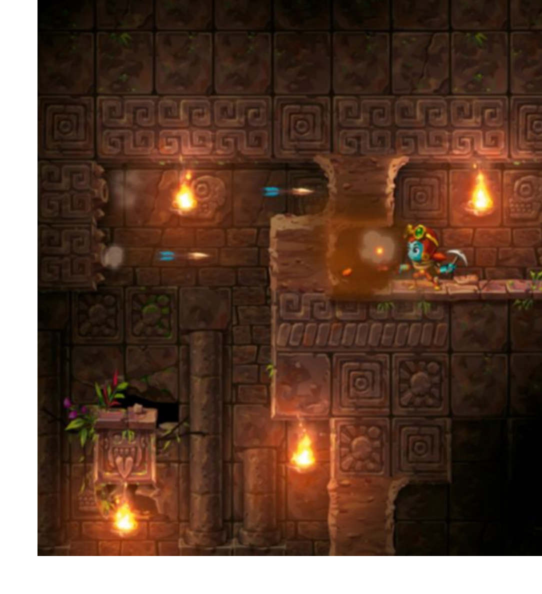


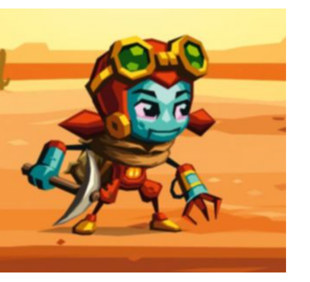
TOP **Each piece of armour allows you to customise how a character plays. Aggressive players might choose items that vastly increase strength; those who prefer to turtle, meanwhile, can boost their defence stats instead.**
ABOVE **Multiverses offer a shifting suite of challenges for the single player. Some will be timed events that impose modifications and restrictions on you, each tied thematically to the different universes you can inhabit**



Developer/ publisher Image & Form
Format Switch
Origin Sweden
Release Summer







STEAMWORLD DIG 2

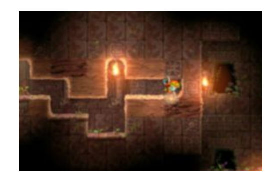
There are no signs of rust in this spacious sequel

Brjann Sigurgeirsson has learned his lesson. The Image & Form CEO, slightly bleary-eyed upon his return from GDC, is playing his cards close to his chest after giving away a little too much a little too soon for his studio's previous release, *Steamworld Heist*. Though the finished game – a refined, inventive side-scrolling strategy title with realtime aiming – was really rather good, Sigurgeirsson had discussed concepts during its early development that hadn't come to fruition. One critic was moved to chastise the developer at the beginning of his (otherwise positive) review, Sigurgeirsson recalls. "But he was right: it is a problem when developers talk too much about their games," he tells us. "You market it so hard that there's nothing exciting at the end. It's like watching close-up porn – there's nothing more to reveal. You should always leave something to the imagination."

With a prime slot opening Nintendo's most recent indie-focused Direct, it's clear *SteamWorld Dig 2* isn't just a big deal for Image & Form; it matters to the platform holder, too. Like *Dig* and *Heist*, it's a timed exclusive, landing on Switch this summer, but almost certainly heading to other formats afterwards. Having been bitten before by setting concrete release dates that slipped, Sigurgeirsson won't commit any further than that. "We're just going to shut up until we know for sure when it's coming out. I'm not going to make anyone happy by over-promising and under-delivering."

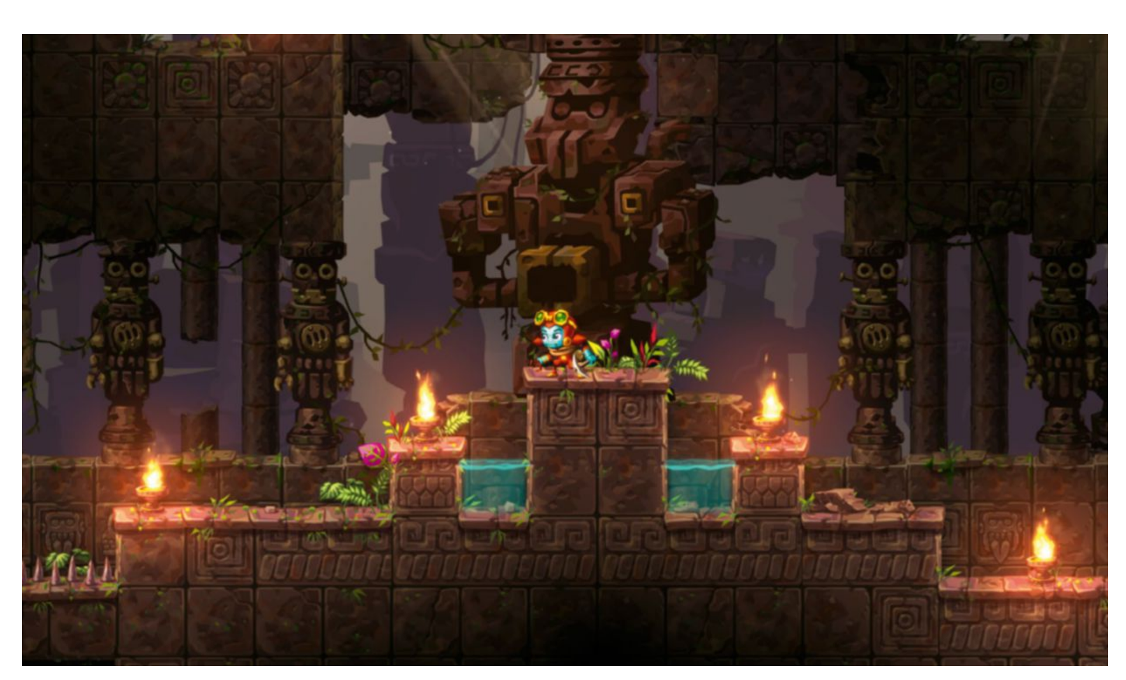
That seems unlikely in this case: this is a tangibly prettier, more ambitious game than its robust, but compact, predecessor. "You'll notice that Image & Form has progressed a little bit in the last few years," Sigurgeirsson says of *Dig 2*'s crisp, detailed art. In the first



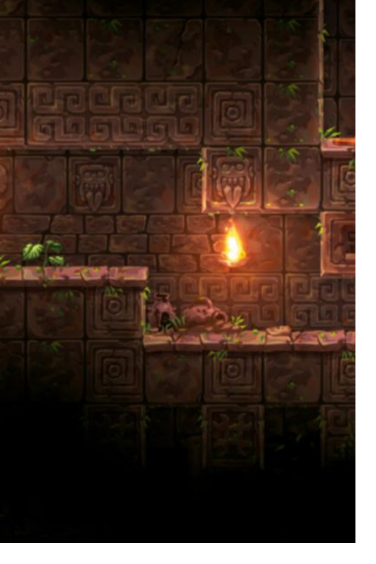


ABOVE **Image & Form is keen for *Dig 2*'s controls to be flexible. "They need to be very good since there are so many platforming elements," Sigurgeirsson explains. "So obviously we're going to spend quite some time to make sure that it feels right for every possible setup"**

The environments are still fairly brown, but the setting is noticeably brighter than the original. Dorothy is vibrantly coloured, which helps her stand out, but there's also greater visual variety in the level furniture









LEFT **Alluding to *Dig*'s final face-off, Sigurgeirsson suggests there will be more than one boss fight in the sequel: "There's a much wider variety of bad guys and battles," he says**



TOP LEFT **Beyond the obvious threat of falling blocks, there are plenty of hazards to keep Dorothy on her steel toes. Tiny pressure plates can trigger traps, while some blocks vanish underfoot, reappearing only once you've passed over them.** ABOVE **Finding an upgrade pod prompts a beautifully animated sequence, as the metallic shell closes around Dorothy as if swallowing her whole, clanking and hissing violently. After a few seconds, she'll emerge triumphantly, evidently keen to demonstrate what her new modifications can do**

Sigurgeirsson is glad his game doesn't have to compete for attention with *Breath Of The Wild*, which is dominating the gaming time of the majority of Switch owners. "I also want more people to get their hands on a Switch unit," he adds

game, progress was mostly vertical; here, you'll spend at least as much time exploring horizontally. "How does that expression go?" he asks, suddenly. "'Bigger, better, faster, stronger?' It's a bigger game in all directions. When we made *SteamWorld Dig*, the main gripe that everyone had was that the game was too short. We don't want to be in that position again. You're really going to get your fill this time."

With original protagonist Rusty missing, presumed dead or decommissioned (for reasons that will be obvious to those who finished the first game), *Dig*'s store owner Dorothy McCrank takes over the lead role. The story resumes not as she begins her search for Rusty, but once she's all but given up hope of ever finding him. A demo of the early stages of her journey carries echoes of *Spelunky*, with its temple background and arrow traps; you'll still be chipping through blocks to carve your way down, but then you'll hit a long, flat floor and find yourself in what may be the closest thing we see to a *Metroid* game on Switch for a little while.

This, we're assured, is just a tiny part of the whole: more levels will be shown off at a later time. But as appetisers go, it does the job, leaving us greedy for more.

So what more *can* he tell us? Dorothy's abilities, beyond the quickly unlocked sprint hydraulics that let her race through a stone door before it slams down, are off the table. "Suffice to say she's able to do stuff that [Rusty] wasn't," Sigurgeirsson tells us. Despite a keenness to give her more distinct capabilities, initially there were concerns that the designers would struggle to find new skills for her to master. Now there are too many ideas. "We're not slashing stuff," he says, carefully. "However, we are selecting from a variety of good ideas, if I can put it that way. Including everything would be like trying to make a cake using all the tasty things you can come up with, like hamburgers and caramels and so on." Any potential new ingredients have to complement the rest of the recipe to stay in.

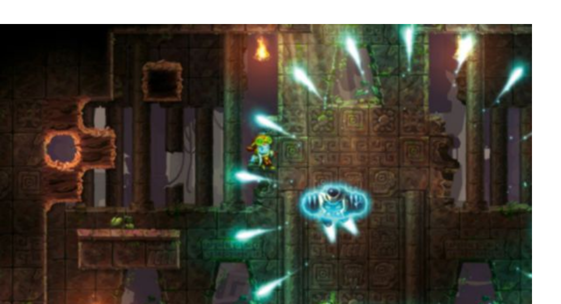
"We don't want to be in that position again. You're really going to get your fill this time"

A longer development period has afforded the design team the room to craft *Dig 2*'s environments by hand. Where the original featured procedurally generated elements to save time, the studio has spent "thousands of hours" building the sequel's levels from scratch. "Every area that you enter in this game just feels exquisite," Sigurgeirsson says. "At Image & Form we're good at making games," he adds, a grin spreading across his face as he delivers the self-deprecating follow-up. "We're terrible at *selling* games." We'll know by the end of summer whether or not the latter is true, but on this evidence Image & Form is a developer that has its priorities well in order. ■



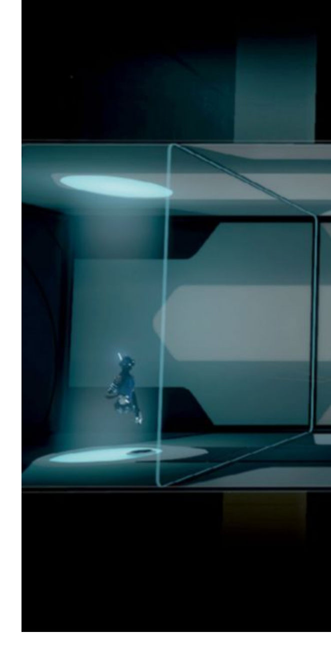
Switched on

Given the studio's ties with Nintendo, Sigurgeirsson is hardly likely to speak badly of Switch, but he is unfakeably enthusiastic about the platform during our conversation. "Have you tried the Pro Controller?" he asks us. "I think it's just splendid. That's going to be my controller of choice now, I think. I can use it for playing Steam games, too!" He's equally ebullient about the Joy-Con's HD Rumble, though he's mindful that a little will go a long way in *SteamWorld Dig 2*. "You'll be chipping through many thousands of blocks, so it could become the oldest feeling in the world. It's like tinnitus if you have it the whole time, so we have to constrain ourselves. But when you do feel it, it's *very* tasty."



Developer/ publisher CCP (Atlanta)
Format PSVR, Rift, Vive
Origin US
Release 2017







SPARC

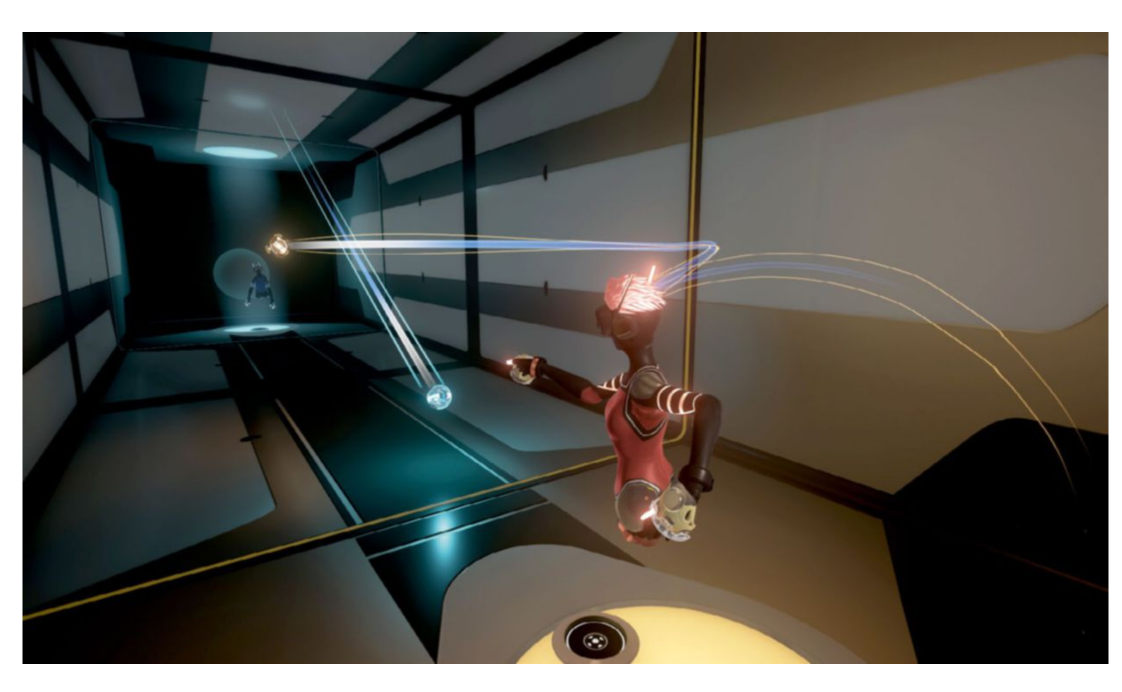
CCP makes a play for the first 'vsport'

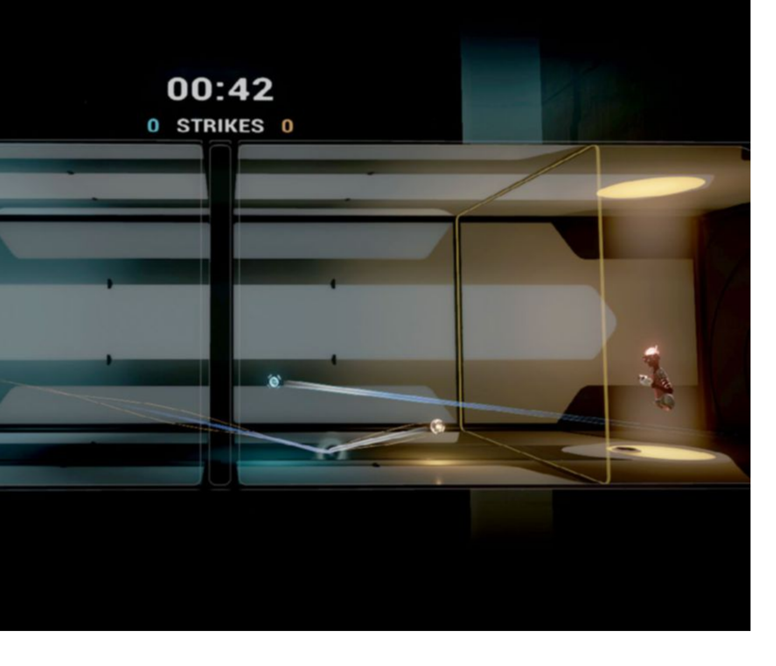
From *Speedball* to *Discs Of Tron*, game designers have long experimented with sports that lie beyond the bounds of current technology. *Sparc*, the Icelandic publisher CCP's first non-spaceship-based virtual reality project, is the latest in the lineage, weaving DNA from a variety of physical and digital sources. The high-walled court of squash combines with baseball's three-strikes rule; the back and forth of tennis is couched in the futuristic styling of 2001's *Cosmic Smash*, one of the few titles released by Sega Rosso, that short-lived arcade division headed by *Sega Rally*'s Kenji Sasaki. These familiar ingredients combine to create something familiar, yet otherworldly.

It's a twoplayer game, which CCP Atlanta wincingly describes as the first 'vsport', since the studio intends it to become a competitive and spectator-friendly sport for the still-nascent VR scene. The rules are straightforward, but nevertheless initially bewildering when experienced first hand. Players face one another from the ends of a long, narrow court. Each holds a ball and the objective is, in simple terms, to throw the projectile with the aim of striking your opponent's body. The ball can be spun and curved with flicks of the wrist, while its speed is set by the force of your throwing motion. In other words, clear your front room.

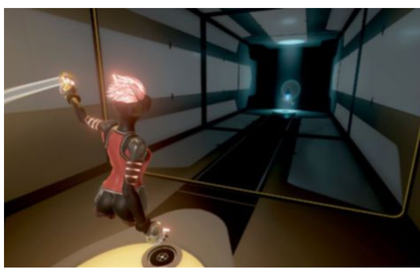
As in *Windjammers*, the classic Frisbee game whose recent resurgence on the competitive scene was surely an inspiration for CCP, the projectile can ricochet off walls to disorientate your opponent. With two projectiles in the field, your attention is split between offensive and defensive play: as well as angling your shots, you must also deflect those of your opponent. Correctly time a

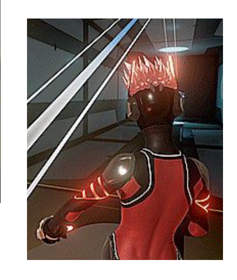
The game is planned for all three major VR headsets on the market. Currently a Rift user can face off against another on Vive, although CCP Atlanta can't yet confirm whether or not it will be able to offer cross-platform play online at launch

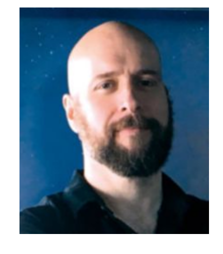




LEFT **CCP Atlanta has plans to sell advertising in Sparc, not only around the court but also potentially on branded versions of the shields worn on the combatants' arms.** BELOW **The team is trying out character customisation. "It's a challenge in VR," Godat says. "Controlling sliders is difficult – you can't make movements super precise"**







Morgan Godat, who is executive producer on the project, previously worked at CCP's Shanghai studio, before moving to Liverpool to work on *EVE Valkyrie*

deflective hit (using knuckle guards, which appear ghost-like on your hands) and the ball can be shot back across the court. You also wear a shield on your non-throwing arm, which is only available while holding a ball in the other. This allows you to simply bat any shots away. When both balls are in play the game becomes intensely physical and mentally taxing. For this reason, perhaps, matches are limited to three minutes.

"In the beginning we had two shields and you could throw one and keep one," executive producer **Morgan Godat** tells us. "It was fun, but crazy hectic. We had to boil it back down, again and again, always asking: 'Are these rules I can understand? Does the game feel natural? And does it fit in a small area?'" This final point is a restriction placed on any would-be VR sport by the current state of the technology. The major headsets are each tethered by a cable that runs to the PC or console, which prevents free movement. Then there are the dangers of hurling oneself around a living room. "We can't have people trying to throw a ball over their heads because they will hit their lamp," Godat says. "And we can't have them diving for the ball and punching a wall. The game has to fit into a fairly confined space, and no part of the game can encourage you to leave that space."

For CCP Atlanta, ensuring *Sparc*'s legibility for spectators has been such an important consideration that it has actively affected the game's design. "We have cut features that were fun to play, simply because they were unreadable," Godat admits. Initially, viewers watched games via separate virtual-reality headsets. But as development has progressed, CCP has translated live coverage to a TV screen, using a thirdperson view that shows both competitors at once. "The consideration has always been, do viewers have a chance in hell of understanding what's going on?" Godat says. "Two balls feels like as much as you can manage. So a critical part of the design process has been, what is the best way to show this on a TV?"

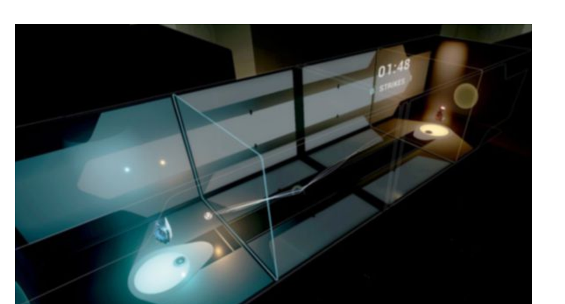
There are surprising subtleties to the control scheme, which affords precision and nuance

There are surprising subtleties and nuances to the control scheme, which affords precision and nuance via whichever pair of controllers you're holding for the headset you wear. But *Sparc* currently suffers from CCP's rather dour presentation, all muted colours and underwhelming visual feedback. Score a hit on your opponent and there's no *Rocket League*-style particle explosion, but these elements may yet be added. Psyonix's breakout competitive hit is a major inspiration for CCP, which intends to add new courts post-launch in much the same way as *Rocket League* added new pitches. "We're still figuring out game modes and courts," Godat says. "We found that when we added in octagons and crazy angles, players' brains couldn't read where the ball was going to bounce. So we want to have a regulation court. But like *Rocket League* we want to mess around with new courts that change the balance. Basically, I'd *love* to have *Rocket League*'s problems." ■

Cannon strike

You can bodily dodge out of the way of incoming projectiles, although using this evasive technique will incur a 'strike'. With each one, your opponent's ball grows in both speed and size, making it more likely that you'll be hit. "We wanted sub-point games, as in baseball," says Godat. "Every one of those plays into a smaller story arc, which plays into a bigger story arc." Three strikes and, with the game's current rule system at least (Godat admits it may be tweaked or rewritten), you automatically lose a point to your opponent, even if you manage to dodge their projectile, which, by this point, is around the size of a beach ball.

Before each match starts players must bump fists in a show of sportsmanship. The game then seamlessly teleports ou to the far ends of the field of play



HEAVEN'S VAULT

Developer/publisher Inkle **Format** Android, iOS, PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** UK **Release** TBA



80 Days developer Inkle's latest project cuts a very different figure to its predecessor, but at its core the spirit of adventure is just as strong. In the game you play Aliya 'El' Elasra who, in the company of her unwilling robotic assistant Six, travels between moons via a network of linking space rivers – which carry air and water – known collectively as the Nebula. The game's mass of ancient, ruined worlds conceals secrets as to its origin, and eventual end. The game features traditional thumbstick navigation within a 3D game world, and Inkle has even created a flexible alien language to learn and master.

SHAKEDOWN HAWAII

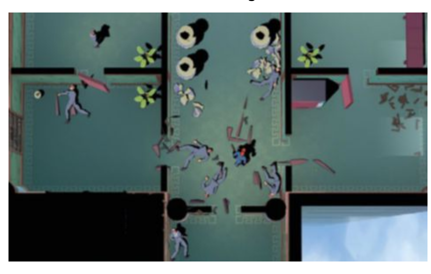
Developer/publisher Vblank Entertainment **Format** Switch **Origin** Canada **Release** April



A follow-up to *Retro City Rampage*, *Shakedown Hawaii* takes place 30 years after the first game and upgrades to a 16bit look. There's something particularly satisfying in the way the chunky sprites ricochet from impacts and violently explode, and while the studio is yet to share full details, *Shakedown Hawaii*'s scope looks considerably larger – incluing a suite of side missions that zip you off to other locations and look more *Cannon Fodder* than *GTA*.

MR SHIFTY

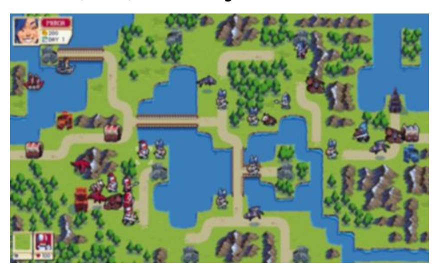
Developer Team Shifty **Publisher** TinyBuild Games
Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Origin** Australia **Release** 2017



While the many walls and doors that feature in *Hotline Miami* provide convenient cover from the eyes and ire of marauding enemies, they really slow down progress. *Mr Shifty* solves this problem by letting you teleport or smash through walls and doors as you run rings around your terrified adversaries.

WAR GROOVE

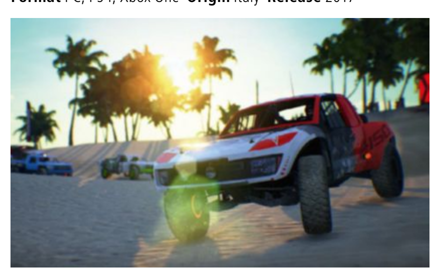
Developer/publisher Chucklefish Games
Format PC, Switch, Xbox One **Origin** UK **Release** 2017



Gosh. Even the typefaces and UI are all but a direct lift from *Advance Wars*, and that colour palette is only a few shades darker. Nintendo doesn't seem too bothered: it showcased this, erm, homage on its own YouTube channel. *Advance Wars*, it seems safe to assume, won't be returning any time soon.

GRAVEL

Developer/publisher Milestone
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** Italy **Release** 2017



Ride and *MXGP* creator Milestone has used Unreal Engine 4 for this off-road racing game. It has four disciplines (combative Wild Rush, checkpoint-based Cross Country, track-focused Speed Cross, and stunt-filled Stadium Circuits) and sprawling environments, but it's those AM2-blue skies that most appeal.

#305

VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY







How Tequila Works came back from the brink stronger, more confident and with an even bolder vision

By Ben Maxwell



hen Tequila Works revealed *Rime* in 2013, its enigmatic adventure garnered immediate acclaim. The trailer didn't give away too much, but the mysterious pastel-shaded island, consisting of bleached-yellow grass fields, empty beaches and foreboding architecture, was unexpected and alluring. The combination of the game's desaturated, crumbling environment and its protagonist – an awkward, but capable, young boy dwarfed by his surroundings – immediately drew comparisons with cherished games such as *Ico* and *Wind Waker*. *Rime*'s reveal was a triumph. But this success nearly killed the project entirely.

"We had a crisis of faith," CEO and creative director **Raúl Rubio** tells us. "We were so overwhelmed by the hype, and what people felt *Rime* was, based on the trailers. We were being compared to masterpieces, and we were scared that people were going to be disappointed. We were terrified after Gamescom because people were saying, 'Oh! You're the next *Wind Waker*! You're the next *Shadow Of The Colossus*,' and we're basically a team of 20 people working in Madrid. The game was just six months into development, and now we had to deliver. We were so eager to tell the world, 'Oh, hey, here we are!' But we announced *Rime* too soon."

The crushing weight of expectation that followed led to hand-wringing introspection within Tequila Works as the small band of developers compared their vision for the game with the public's. Despite its hugely positive reception, the trailer hadn't turned out quite as the team had hoped and had failed to clearly communicate what the game was. Development continued, and the team began planning a new trailer for Gamescom the following year.

"The reveal trailer had a piano track that in hindsight I realise was totally unsynchronised with the action. At first we tried to do the music and sound like in any movie, trying to adapt it to the action. But it wasn't very emotional – it was a disaster. So after that I told David [García, composer and sound designer] to go home and start improvising, and whatever he composed would be right. So he improvised the track that we put in the next trailer."

Viewed back-to-back, the difference is striking. The power of the new trailer restored the team's courage as well as setting the game's soundtrack in a new direction (see 'Fine tuning'). But there was still a disconnect between the studio's ideas and the audience's perception of the game. "People loved it and said, 'Oh, it's beautiful, but where's the gameplay?'" recalls Rubio. "We were like, 'Oh crap, it hasn't worked!'"

Just a couple of months later, *Rime* starred on the cover of **E**273. It was a world-exclusive feature that Tequila hoped would finally clear up exactly what the game was.

It almost worked. "We really felt confident that people would get the game when **Edge** played it, and having that cover was great," Rubio says. "But then when we tried to replicate that with other media, it wasn't so great – the comparisons with *Wind Waker* were still there, and people were expecting enemies, combat and other things that we weren't going to be able to deliver even if we had wanted to."

Self-doubt began to creep back in. Tequila Works spent several months trying to work out what had gone wrong while simultaneously wrestling with a rapidly ballooning development project. After careful consideration, Rubio and his staff decided that the only possible way out of this bind was to put the game in players' hands, instead of those of the press. The simple answer, they decided, was to build a demo, something that the team estimated could be achieved in between six and nine months of development time. However, as the anticipation continued to swell, and Rubio continued to question his vision, that calculation proved somewhat off the mark.

"It took us two-and-a-half years," Rubio says with a laugh. "We were too optimistic about our own deadlines. But that time spent not paying attention to the world and focusing on ourselves has been positive in the end because we could really thinking about what *Rime* was, and what it was not. The spirit of crisis during development was a consequence of us not being sure if people understood what *Rime* was, but more importantly if they were going to like a game with no combat about a kid alone in a world. When we emerged on the other side of the tunnel, we had the answer, and we're surprised and grateful about how patient fans have been, because if I was a ▶

FINE TUNING

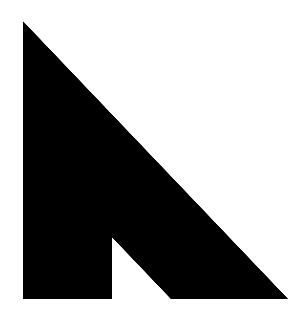
Composer and sound designer David García improvised the music for *Rime*'s second trailer after the team found that the more traditional scoring approach taken for the reveal trailer didn't quite work. It was a decision that had larger repercussions for the game, too, as Rubio explains. "It was great for the trailer, and so we decided that for the entire soundtrack we just needed David to improvise lots of music, so we had many tracks that we could dynamically adapt to the action. It works, firstly, because David is a very talented composer! But second, it also fits with our decision to not do tutorials or dialogue or anything like that – we're not going to do a track that *tells* you you're going to feel sadness. If you feel melancholy or don't, that's not up to us because we want you to experience this world at your own pace. The music isn't going to be there all the time trying to be epic when it's not supposed to. It's more intimate, more personal. *Rime* isn't about saving the world or rescuing a princess. It's literally that you are a child on an island, and we want you to feel like one.



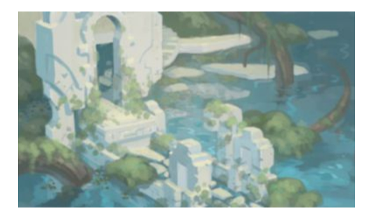
“WE WERE SO EAGER TO TELL THE WORLD, ‘OH, HEY, HERE WE ARE!’ BUT WE ANNOUNCED RIME TOO SOON”

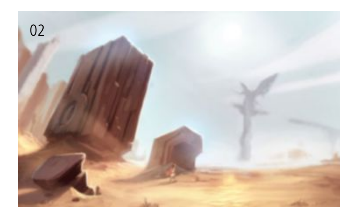
Game *Rime*
Developer Tequila Works
Publisher Grey Box Games
Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
Release May 26

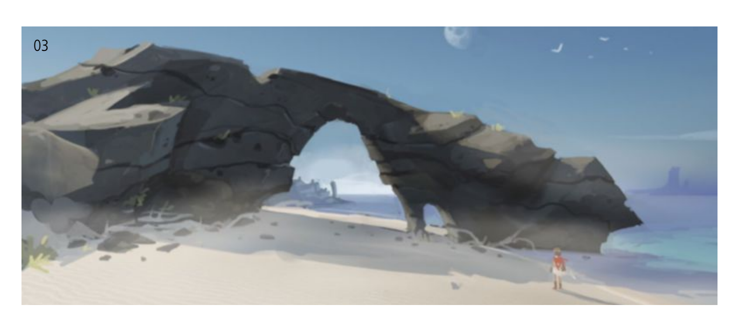

"I BEGAN TO UNDERSTAND THAT MAYBE PEOPLE CAN LOVE SOMETHING SO MUCH THAT THEY CAN HATE IT"

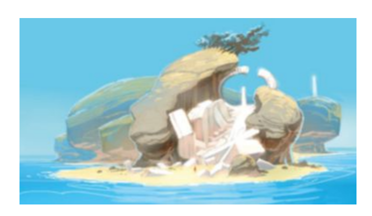


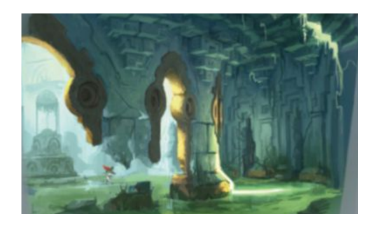


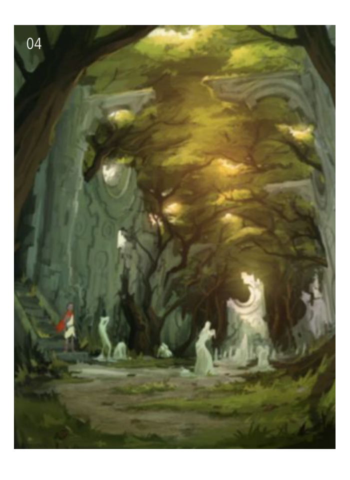












01 **The origin of the structures found on the island is uncertain, but murals throughout the world offer clues as to their provenance.** 02 **There's a surprising amount of environmental diversity as you move between chapters.** 03 **While puzzles gate off some of the environment, you're always free to run off and explore other areas.** 04 **The game's mossy, overgrown interiors contrast with its bright outdoor spaces**

gamer waiting for this game, I would've assumed that it was dead.

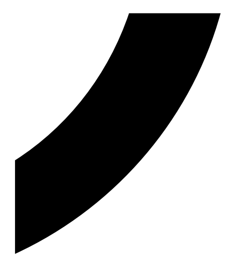
"Even so, if I had read Neogaf at the time the game probably wouldn't exist. I spent some time six months ago going through two-and-a-half years of comments on Neogaf, and I was literally crying for two days. Partly because I just don't understand the cruelty, but more importantly because I could see those years over those two days, and I began to understand that maybe people can love something so much that they can hate it."

There was no sign of animosity at this year's Game Developers Conference, which took place at the beginning of March and saw a large audience get their hands on the now multiformat *Rime* (see 'Time and reason') for the first time. Rubio – who was one of three Tequila Works staffers to give a talk at the event – may have come away with a sore throat and high-temperature fever, and noisy booths aren't the best way to appreciate *Rime*'s contemplative atmosphere. But both are prices he's happy to pay for the opportunity to see the game being experienced in the wild.

"It was amazing because we could walk around and watch and chat to players," Rubio says. "Just imagine yourself working on something for many years, and then you pretend to be some random person and ask people, 'Hey, what game is this? What's it about?' And then they spend ages telling you how amazing the game is and why they like it.

"Sometimes, when you're creating a game that is beautiful, you're afraid that it's going to be beautiful and hollow. But that wasn't the case – people were loving it, and they enjoyed playing it, not just looking at it. And that was probably the biggest relief for us, because we wanted to create something beautiful but meaningful at the same time. Fingers crossed, but I think we're now on track to achieve the vision we set out for *Rime*, which is nothing less than giving players the chance to see the world through the eyes of a child again."

Taking control of the young hero, exploring a world free from narration, tutorials and, for the most part, life, it's very clear that Rubio's new-found confidence is justified. The boy's movements are at once awkward yet flowing, and his diminutive stature ensures that he feels vulnerable in a world that is mostly free from threats. At first, getting about can feel ponderous, however. It's not that the boy ▶



doesn't feel responsive, but his movements are decidedly unhurried and there's no sprint button to gee him along more quickly. *Rime*'s unique rhythm doesn't take long to charm us, but while it all feels finely tuned now, getting the balance right was problematic.

"We had a conflict," explains Rubio. "Our lead animator, Sandy [Christensen] is ex LucasArts, Pixar and Double Fine. She wanted to convey a believable child, which for her meant he had to be clumsy – someone not in full control of their body and who is still learning, but still someone with determination and wits. But the player needs an immediate response from the controls."

It was an issue Tequila faced with its debut game *Deadlight*, a project that drew inspiration from '90s 2D adventures like *Another World* and *Flashback* – including the sometimes sluggish, animation-driven feel of their controls. Rubio admits that it was a misstep, and is well aware that it caused problems for some players, so running up against the same problem with *Rime* proved stressful.

"For many months *Rime* also had a control system that was driven by animation," he continues. "The kid felt like a kid, but sometimes you'd press jump and he wouldn't do it because he wasn't at the right frame. That was frustrating. But Sandy has some very good friends at Naughty Dog, and we took inspiration from *Jak And Daxter*'s animation system, which uses hundreds of very small animation cycles with a lot of blending. Even then we noticed that there were still milliseconds that didn't feel right. So we decided that there were some actions that should be interruptible – for example, if you're running up a slope and you hit jump, the animation will immediately switch to jumping."

This more pragmatic approach to design has saturated every aspect of the game over the past couple of years. At one point its puzzle count swelled to over 500, a number that inevitably compartmentalised *Rime*'s world through some aggressive gating and a surfeit of self-contained puzzle rooms that would lock the player inside. The initial template also required players to manage the boy's thirst and hunger – mechanics that proved similarly destructive to the pacing.

"I know that this makes us seem closer in comparison to Fumito Ueda's work, but over ▶

Rime's striking protagonist is a pleasure to control, though the deliberately slow speed of movement takes some getting used to initially



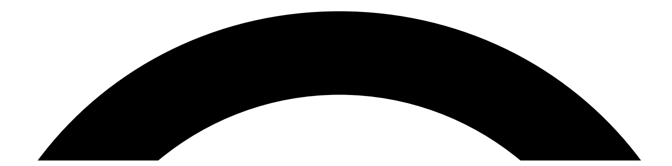
"THE KID FELT LIKE A KID, BUT SOMETIMES YOU'D PRESS JUMP AND HE WOULDN'T DO IT"

"I'M REALLY THANKFUL TO PRODUCTION, BECAUSE THEY FORBID US FROM PLAYING GAMES LIKE THE WITNESS"

ABOVE **This puzzle requires you to amplify your shout through a series of jade globes.** RIGHT **These wispy, unnerving creatures run from us when we approach them, and don't appear to pose a threat.** FAR RIGHT **We find remnants of these automatons, but have yet to encounter a functioning one.** BELOW **The game's environments dwarf the young boy, creating some vertiginous platforming challenges in the process**







the past couple of years *Rime* and the world have been shaped by subtraction," Rubio explains. "We had too many things, and we realised that we had to remove what was unnecessary for the experience in order to focus on what was really important. By including the survival aspects, we stepped away from our original vision.

"Playtesters were always cooking pinecones, or trying to find fresh water and things like that, and they forgot about exploring. They felt like Robinson Crusoe, not a kid. Removing those things made it better for everyone: you'd be surprised how fast adults change their mindset from, 'I'm going to discover all the items in this area,' to, 'What's behind that hill? I want to see.' And you have to remember we're a small indie team, so it enabled us to focus on the things that really made *Rime*, *Rime*, and not *Rime: Don't Starve* or whatever. I think, in the end, removing all of those mechanics and going back to the basics saved *Rime*, but more importantly it saved us and our sanity."

Of course, Jonathan Blow was working on a similar set of problems at the same time and solved them, the result of which was 2016's astonishing puzzle game *The Witness*. That game shares much in common with *Rime* – both are set on a mysterious island, both centre on solving environmental puzzles left by an unseen creator, and both seek to let the player explore their surroundings freely. The similarity clearly wasn't lost on *Rime*'s producers.

"I'm really thankful to production, because they forbid us from playing games like *The Witness* during development!" Rubio says. "We were only allowed to play it last December – we didn't know why at the time, but there was a very good reason. It's a beautiful world, and has a very similar approach to puzzles. But I'm very glad that we didn't play it until December, otherwise I'm pretty sure we would have taken inspiration from Jonathan Blow [and his team], because their puzzles are far more sophisticated than ours!"

Puzzles in *Rime* revolve around perspective, sound, light and darkness. The boy is able to sing and shout, and anything made of jade will react to his voice. Little rotund statues will light up when he yelps, opening doors or powering mechanisms – though, often, you'll need to find a way to light up more than one at once in order to proceed, perhaps through careful positioning, or finding some way to amplify your voice. At one point we find ourselves in a near pitch-black labyrinth raised up high above some unseen floor. Here, the boy's tuneful singing illuminates statues that help us remember where we've been, as well as show up the precarious platform edges we need to stay away from.

Perspective puzzles require the use of special viewing platforms – some fixed and some rotatable – behind which you must position gold fragments in order to match the shape of sealed doorways or other objects to reveal a pathway. And there are also strange mechanisms that allow you to accelerate or reverse the game's day/night cycle in order to create particular shadows. But while it's impossible not to be reminded of *The Witness* as we play, *Rime*'s puzzles inarguably have their own character, while feeling just as well seated in Tequila's distinctive open world.

They're also complemented by a good pinch of platforming as we work our way around the remnants of once-grand structures, and the two aspects are combined in a new way when we reach the second chapter of the game. Set in a more arid-looking area, devoid of the lush greens that characterise our initial exploration, this new region contains three large windmills, dozens of small stone shelters, and dazzling gold detailing. But we're not alone here – a giant bird patrols the skies, hunting, and the reddening edges of the screen that occur if we spend more than a few seconds out in the open alert us to the fact that it has a bead on us.

Hiding under any kind of shelter provides protection, and a number of short underground tunnels allow us to move larger distances safely. Activating the windmill – which is capable of generating a storm to scare the bird away – is an involved process that includes making our way across the dangerous open ground, pushing and pulling blocks into place to unfold golden petal-like platforms, and the location of a key, all the while being harried by the swooping bird. When we succeed, a thick black cloud pours out of the windmill and into the sky, blocking out the sun above but giving us the freedom to explore freely again – though now in the presence of a number of strange hooded figures who recoil in fear whenever we approach them. Rubio won't be drawn on what or who they are, nor their role in game's sparsely told story, but they're certainly a disquieting presence.

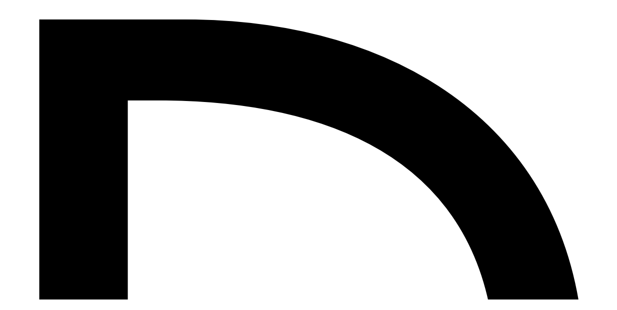
"The story's not about you being some amnesiac character who doesn't remember ▶

TIME AND REASON

When *Rime* was announced it was a PlayStation exclusive, but Rubio wanted the studio to retain the rights to the game, and be able to release it on other platforms. Lacking the financial clout needed to buy them back from Sony, however, Tequila needed to find a partner who could help. Its business rep, DDM Agency, introduced the studio to Six Foot, who in turn put Rubio and co in touch with *Dreadnought* publisher Grey Box. "We had to solve the situation pretty fast because we had responsibilities and they were super-receptive to the idea," Rubio recalls. "They were totally fine with us keeping the rights, they were totally fine not stepping in on any creative decisions – the game is so personal and was so advanced in development, anyone that is messing with it is going to cause a delay in the best case and probably in the worst case is going to collapse the whole thing. When you're dealing with a new publisher, you don't know if they are going to be the cool guy, or try to be the next 'insert evil publisher name here'. We're lucky they turned out to be the cool guy. Working with them has been easy and it's probably something we'd like to repeat."



Creative director Raúl Rubio

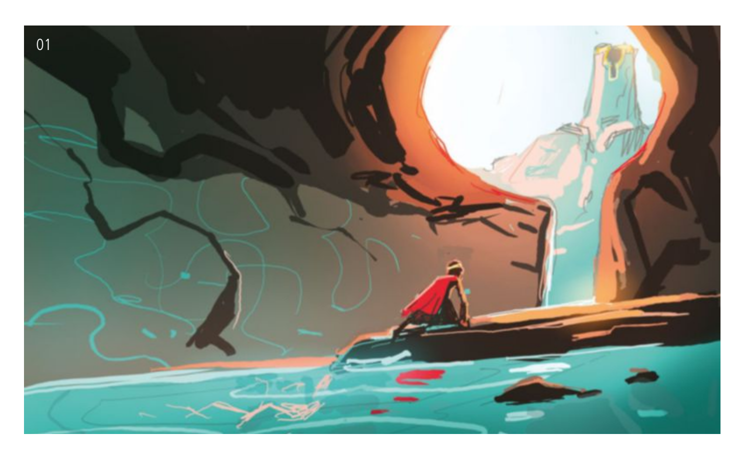


who you are, and must overthrow some evil warlord or whatever," Rubio says. "We didn't want to tell a story about black and white or good and evil. Instead it's about you having no idea what this world is and what the rules of the world are. And you are going to learn, just like any child must learn to discover the world. In *The Witness*, the puzzles are the main driver, and learning the rules of those puzzles is what will make you move through the game. In *Rime*, you also need to learn the rules about everything else, too. How you navigate, how you interact with the elements, how the other characters are related to you. And when you think you know the rules, we add new rules.

"In the second area, with the bird, you suddenly can't explore freely and you have an element of pressure. And that's something that you want to change – to revert the status quo to the happy exploration that you had in the first chapter, right? The more you play the game, the more you will discover and then better adapt to the rules. And things that maybe lacked meaning before, suddenly will have meaning for you."

After a prolonged and noticeable absence, *Rime* is very nearly with us. The process of getting it to this point hasn't been easy, and it's taken its toll on Rubio and the team, but with the darkest times now behind them there's no longer the sense that the game has lost its way. Without that extra time, *Rime* would have been built from more pieces, but likely would have been much less of a game. Rubio is positive about *Rime*'s future, and excited to see it finally released, but he can't help but reflect on the difficult years that led up to this moment.

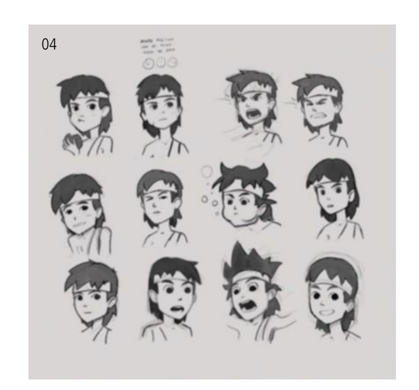
"If I had to change something about development I would probably have been more open with the public and explained the situation," he muses. "Cabybara did a great job when they had to explain that *Below* wasn't ready. We should have done something similar, but we were too embarrassed and we felt so small, so we didn't feel that people were going to understand the reasons. I don't have a clear answer to that other than offering my apologies to anyone who has been upset by the amount of time it took to get done. The only thing I can say is that next time I really hope that it will take less time. But game development isn't a science – it's more like an art, or cooking. Sometimes you are cooking a soufflé, and it's not rising. But other times it rises so much that it explodes." ■

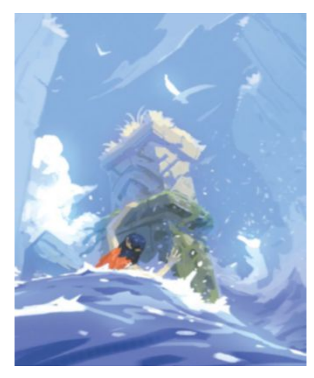








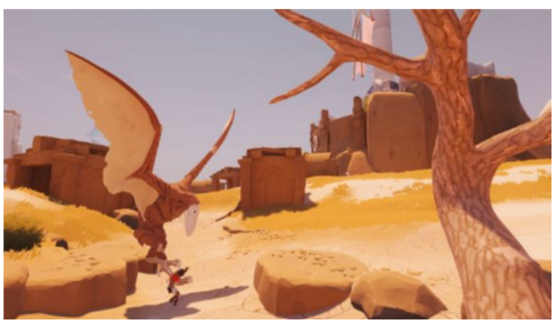


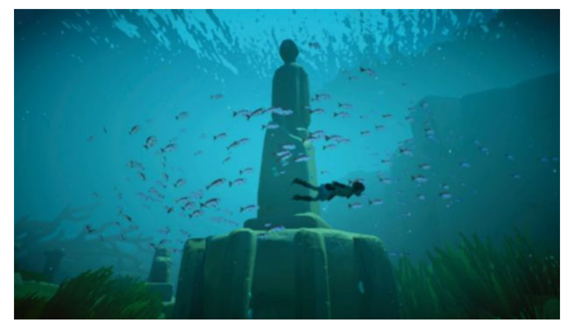


01 **This key-hole motif is repeated throughout the world.** 02 **The location of this friendly fox is often a hint as to what to focus on next.** 03 ***Rime*'s crumbling world is intoxicating. Reaching some of its more precarious locations will require some risky climbing, however.** 04 **While you'll spend more of your time looking at the boy's back than his face, his movements are equally as characterful and expressive**

> "I WOULD PROBABLY HAVE BEEN MORE OPEN WITH THE PUBLIC... WE WERE TOO EMBARRASSED AND WE FELT SO SMALL"

ABOVE **Some of *Rime's* interiors are surprisingly dark, making navigation a challenge.** RIGHT **Any ledges dashed with guano can be grabbed and used to climb or shimmy.** FAR RIGHT **The boy is a capable swimmer, and there are some richly detailed underwater areas to explore if you've got the lungs for it.** BELOW **The Predator will harass you when you're out in the open, though death simply means a reload nearby**





COLLECTED WORKS
EUGENE JARVIS

FIREPOWER
Developer/publisher Williams **Format** Pinball **Release** 1980

DEFENDER
Developer/publisher Williams Electronics **Format** Arcade **Release** 1981

STARGATE
Developer Vid Kidz **Publisher** Williams Electronics **Format** Arcade **Release** 1981

ROBOTRON: 2084
Developer Vid Kidz **Publisher** Williams Electronics **Format** Arcade **Release** 1982

BLASTER
Developer Vid Kidz **Publisher** Williams Electronics **Format** Arcade **Release** 1983

NARC
Developer/ publisher Williams Electronics **Format** Arcade **Release** 1988

SMASH TV
Developer/ publisher Williams Electronics **Format** Arcade **Release** 1990

CRUIS'N USA
Developer Midway Games **Publisher** Midway Games, Nintendo **Format** Arcade, N64 **Release** 1994

THE FAST AND THE FURIOUS
Developer Raw Thrills **Publisher** Raw Thrills, Taito **Format** Arcade **Release** 2004

CRUIS'N BLAST
Developer Raw Thrills **Publisher** Raw Thrills, Nintendo **Format** Arcade **Release** 2016

NEX MACHINA
Developer/publisher Housemarque **Format** PS4 **Release** 2017

The evil genius of the arcade era reflects on the string of classic games he helped create

By Ben Maxwell

Photography **Andre Avanessian**



Eugene Jarvis is one of the earliest pioneers of the modern videogame industry. He co-created a string of classic arcade games – including *Defender*, *Robotron 2048*, *Smash TV* and *Cruis'n USA* – that are still discussed today, introduced the concept of twin-stick controls nearly two decades before they became widely accepted, and now heads leading arcade development studio Raw Thrills. His earliest ideas continue to charm generation after generation as new spins on *Defender* and *Robotron* are created by studios that were influenced by his early work. However, before all of that, Jarvis began his illustrious game career creating the light and sound effects for pinball machines.

FIREPOWER

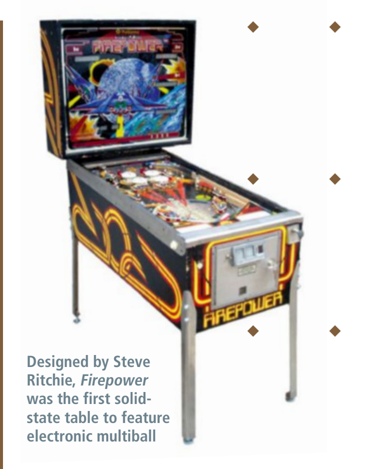
Manufacturer Williams **Format** Pinball **Release** 1980

Pinball was a big influence on me. It instilled that whole man-versus-machine gameplay thing in me. I was a child of the analogue age. I grew up back in the '50s and '60s; fun was blowing things up with gunpowder, lighting model airplanes on fire and seeing the burning plastic drip on your foot as you screamed in terror. But I was fascinated by pinball machines. The coolest thing about them was that you didn't have a lot of coins in your pocket, so it became about how you could get a free game. How could you beat the machine – in any way possible, fair or foul? The one I loved making most was *Firepower* because it was very easy to play a multiball game; if you wanted you could just play all five balls at once. A lot of the sounds that I developed for that game went on to be used in *Defender* and *Robotron*. In the pinball era programmers would have to work with a mechanical designer and a game designer. You'd try to come up with some ideas, but at the end of the day you were just enhancing a game – you were the special effects guy. Videogames created a chance for the programmer to take over; he could do anything. But the curse of videogames is that not only is anything possible, but nothing is taken for granted. Every game starts as a blank screen, which is pretty humbling.



"An amazing thing happens when you lose yourself in a game," Jarvis muses. "You start dreaming that reaity. When you come home at night, you're still flying around in your spaceship. Defender was about tapping into that deep sense of purpose"

"OK, NOW IT'S NOT JUST A BALL BOUNCING OFF A HOCKEY PUCK. I'VE GOT TO GET INVOLVED"



Designed by Steve Ritchie, *Firepower* was the first solid-state table to feature electronic multiball

DEFENDER

Developer/publisher Williams Electronics **Format** Arcade **Release** 1981

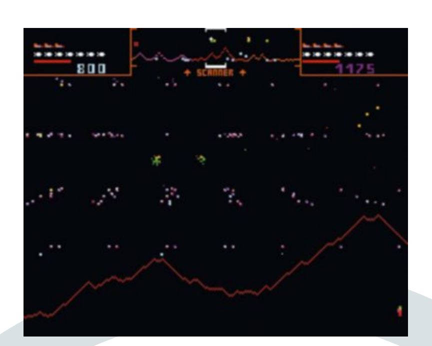
I'd just come off *Firepower*, which I worked on with Steve Ritchie, and I kind of felt that it was the ultimate pinball game, a legendary machine. But I was super excited about *Space Invaders*, *Asteroids*, *Space Wars*... there were all these amazing games coming out, and I was like, 'My god, OK, now it's not just a ball bouncing off a hockey puck. This is some really cool stuff, I've got to get involved.' I was working at Williams at the time, and we hadn't done a videogame before, which was kind of a problem! What kind of hardware should we use? How do you make pixels? It was ground up. Back then if you wanted to make something cool you basically had to design your own hardware system. I remember we were like, 'Should we make it colour or black and white?' I came up with the name, *Defender*. I had some moral

hang-ups about blowing things up. At the end of the day you want to blow up a lot of shit, but you need some moral premise to justify you blowing up a lot of shit! So the idea was that you were defending something. Bad guys are coming so, as you're defending life and liberty, you're justified to take extreme measures. We got that straight, so we had the moral high ground there. The graphics were primitive in that era, and we didn't have a very good pixel rate on our hardware. But one of the cool things we did was make the entire memory, which came to be known as a bitmap, or a memory map, architecture. There was no special-purpose graphics hardware; the microprocessor would just draw these objects in a big electronic easel. We didn't have any of the limitations of motion objects, or how many colours we could have in our backgrounds, that other machines of that era had.

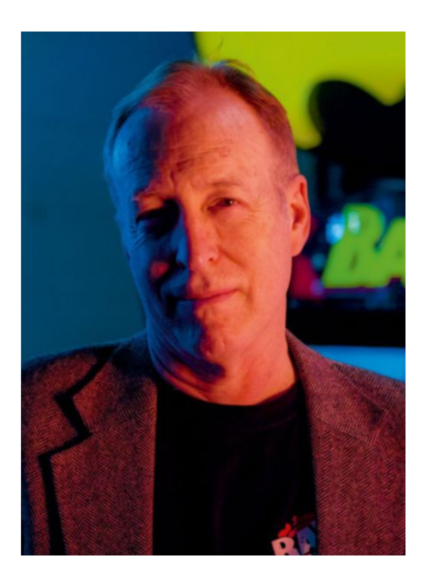
STARGATE

Developer Vid Kidz **Publisher** Williams Electronics **Format** Arcade **Release** 1981

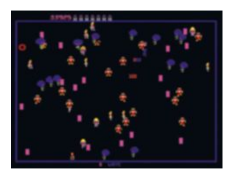
Stargate was *Defender* 2. Larry DeMar and I founded Vid Kidz to make it, but that was a crock, really. We'd been doing this shit at Williams, and we just walked out the door and were doing the same shit, really. We were even using their equipment! There was a certain freedom from bureaucracy and stuff, but we only had one computer. So I worked during the daytime, and Larry worked at night. It was kinda neat – he would work all night and I'd come in in the morning, like, 'What have you got done?' We were almost extensions of each other's brains. We were extremely focused; when you're in your own business it's amazing how much is possible. It's weird how, when you're working for some big corporation you're like, 'These working conditions are impossible. This computer I have is six months old, running Windows 94, I should be running Windows 107! I can't do any work on this shit! And my chair's uncomfortable, and the heating's too hot!' Then you're in your own thing and it's like, 'You mean I have to *buy* this 40 million gigabyte machine? Oh, this 20 million gigabyte machine is fine.' You're working in a closet in the middle of the night with no heat and it's fine. In a larger corporation your attitude is why things can't happen. Then when you're doing your own thing, suddenly everything's possible. Your job is to figure out ways to get shit done, rather than figuring out the reason things are impossible.



"*Stargate* was an opportunity to revisit *Defender* and fix things we should have fixed," Jarvis says. "I loved it, but *Defender* captures a more pure essence of the game"









Robotron's innovative twin-stick design proved problematic for a lot of players who struggled to master the dual controls

ROBOTRON: 2084

Developer Vid Kidz **Publisher** Williams Electronics **Format** Arcade **Release** 1982

The cool thing about *Robotron* is that it's the only game I ever worked on that was fun within three or four days of starting development. Most games feel like they take forever to get all the characters, and AI, and all this shit. You have this brilliant design, but it takes forever to implement those cool ideas. Larry DeMar and I had an idea for this game called *Conquest*. Imagine taking *Asteroids* or *Spacewars* and turning it into this huge universe that you're out fighting in, and maybe mining asteroids and building spaceships. But I was thinking about other ideas, too, and I was really inspired by this robot game called *Berzerk* that came out about the same time *Defender* did. I was super-frustrated about the controls; you only had one joystick and you had to move towards the thing that was trying to shoot you in order to kill it. It was tense and an amazing white-knuckle experience, but at the end of the day you felt really frustrated by the single joystick. It was also around the time that I'd had a car accident and my right hand was broken, so I had limited mobility and was thinking about how to deal with that. And at some point, through thinking about these two things, the idea of having one joystick to move and one to fire hit me. The freedom you had with that was just amazing and you could blow the shit out of everything. Interestingly, later I learned that the best players of *Robotron* tend to be left-handed – I think because they tend to be more ambidextrous because the world is built for right-handed people. During that era you could tell if people were left or right handed because you could look at the ▶

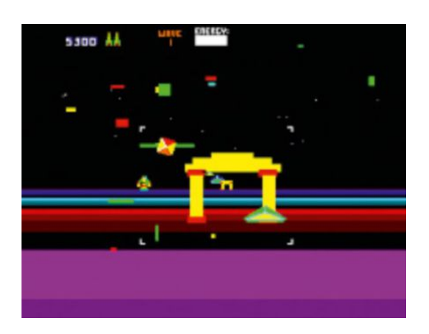
cigarette burns on either side of the control panel. I noticed that the right side of the panel on *Defender* machines was just totally charred, but with *Robotron* it was equally charred on both sides. Which is kind of amazing, because left-handed people are a small percentage of the population.

The downside is that you create a really good control setup that gives players an awful lot of power and freedom, but that then means you have this arms race where the machine has to step up its game. All of sudden you empower the player, so then you must empower the machine to make it a fair match. So the idea became about how you create these ultimate enemies. In *Space Invaders* the shit was always coming down on you, and you were stuck on a one-dimensional line. So it was like, let's make that two dimensions where you can move around on the screen, and now instead of shit coming down on you, let's have shit coming at you from all sides simultaneously [laughs]. When I was first programming the game I made four or five enemies, and then boom, boom, boom, we kill those guys. 'Ah, okay, how about ten guys?' Boom, boom, boom, boom. And then I'm like, 'How about a hundred guys?' [laughs]. And it was like, 'Fuck, I can't deal with this shit!' It's amazing how you just all of sudden focus when you're forced to. It's like being in a start-up company with your own freaking money, and the shit is everywhere, on all sides: go! Where there's a will, there's a way.

BLASTER

Developer Vid Kidz **Publisher** Williams Electronics **Format** Arcade **Release** 1983

3D was the next big thing, so we wanted to get on the bandwagon. We had to figure out how we were going to do it, and it was challenging because the hardware of that era, in retrospect, wasn't really capable of much 3D [laughs]. We'd developed this custom graphics chip for *Robotron*, one of the first graphics co-processors, and we got some primitive stuff going on with that even though it wasn't really designed for it. For technical reasons we decided it would have to be a space game, because a black background was free in terms of processing overheads! We played around with stars and asteroids and shit, and it ended up being that you're just going down this tunnel, and in the distance it's just little points, and it's hard to relate to a couple of specks out there in the distance. 3D had all this promise, but we realised that you lose a lot too. You're not a god's eye looking down on the world anymore. You're in the world and you have this limited information which, unfortunately, traps you in rather trivial gameplay. *Blaster* fell into that trap and became just target practice in a tunnel. I guess ultimately it was somewhat disappointing, and 3D turned out not to be the be all and end all – who would have thought that, 35 years later, people would be playing *Candy Crush* 24/7?



Blaster uses sprite scaling to give the impression of three dimensions. Only three sit-down cabinets were produced



"YOU EMPOWER THE PLAYER, SO THEN YOU MUST EMPOWER THE MACHINE TO MAKE IT A FAIR MATCH"

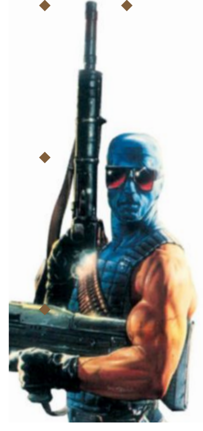
NARC

Developer/publisher Williams Electronics **Format** Arcade **Release** 1988

I've personally known a number of people who have either died from, or gotten into deep trouble with, drugs. And so in some ways, even though it's tongue in cheek, *Narc* was inspired by the idea of wanting to say, 'This shit really *is* dangerous'. The idea was that you were rewarded if you busted the dealers rather than killed them. It was this risk/reward thing because you had to go right up to them to do it. I was super excited about doing digitised people. It was a new technology, but part of it was a lack of resources. At that time the Japanese were doing some amazing character games like *Super Mario Bros* with incredible animations and beautiful hand-drawn artwork. But the whole videogame division at Williams had evaporated in the videogame crash, and we were trying to re-establish things and had a small team of three or four people. We were trying to figure out how to make a videogame when we didn't have an art department of 30 people to create all these amazing animations. Rather than getting an animator to spend a month trying to make a character kick a ball, all of sudden it was just, get a guy in a suit and say, 'OK, dude, kick a ball!' You could







Narc's violence caused a small amount of controversy, but the lack of a home version meant that it mostly avoided the ire of parents

riff off 50 animations in a day, and have all these cool costumes. We had dogs in the game, too. I remember we had all these pitbulls in the studio and at one point one of them got loose. I was standing behind the camera and this pitbull starts walking towards me. And I'm like, 'Holy shit…' Luckily nothing happened. I remember one of the board of directors of Williams came down and was pretty shocked by the whole game and the level of violence. He said the whole thing was a surrealistic nightmare, which we adopted. It was like, 'Yes! I guess we succeeded!'

SMASH TV

Developer/publisher Williams Electronics **Format** Arcade **Release** 1990

After we came out with *Robotron*, I thought the dual-joystick thing was going to be standard throughout the universe, but it wasn't until nearly 20 years later with the PlayStation that it became a standard control setup. So we thought, 'If nobody else is going to make a dual-joystick game, then we'll just make another one!' I was working with this kid called Mark Turmell who went on to do *NBA Jam* and a lot of cool stuff. He works at Zynga these days. He was a *Robotron* freak, but I was a little sceptical about doing a twin-stick shooter. Over the years players have become more and more casual, at least in the arcade space. You can't really destroy them like you used to. But I went with it. *Robocop* and *Running Man* had come out, and we were all inspired by those. So the idea of a futuristic gameshow where you're killing people for toasters came about. We had some brilliant character designs from John Tobias, who ended up being the artist behind *Mortal Kombat*. So we had kind of an all-star team. To get the basic characters we actually got onto a step ladder and filmed people from that same angle that the camera in the game was at. John took that framework and created beautiful characters, and he actually got so good at it that after that first character he created characters pixel by pixel and constructed all the different views from his mind. It's still one of my favourite games to this day.





Smash TV's mythical pleasure domes, supposedly reached by hoovering up keys during play, never actually existed

CRUIS'N USA

Developer Midway Games **Publisher** Midway Games, Nintendo
Format Arcade, N64 **Release** 1994

Cruis'n USA was a really fun project. I loved playing *Outrun* and *Pole Position* and all that stuff, so I'd always wanted to try making a driving game. A big issue was hardware; getting a graphics system that could throw out enough pixels and do all the 3D crap and everything. The idea was to utilise 3D texture mapping, which I don't think anyone had actually done in games at that point. We realised we could put in real scenery and real buildings and have the Eiffel Tower, and mountains and the Golden Gate bridge, and have a real-world driving game, where you can actually drive to real places, kind of like adventure tourism. The hardware guy we had was Mark Loffredo, who did the hardware for *Narc* and a lot of our stuff, and he was gung-ho when it came to 3D texture mapping. We worked a few years and actually came up with a pretty damn good 3D texture-mapping system. I think ▶



"There the was no 3D design software, so our artists had to actually type in the coordinates of the polygons in *Cruis'n USA*," Jarvis reveals. "A fair amount of the game was designed by typing, you know, -107, 76, 29. It was so fucking painful"

our system was better than the Sony PlayStation, and we designed it with, like, three hardware guys, three software guys and a couple of artists. It was around half-a-dozen guys and we basically designed the Sony PlayStation, and did a really cool driving game to boot [laughs]. I thought it was a pretty good project.

THE FAST AND THE FURIOUS

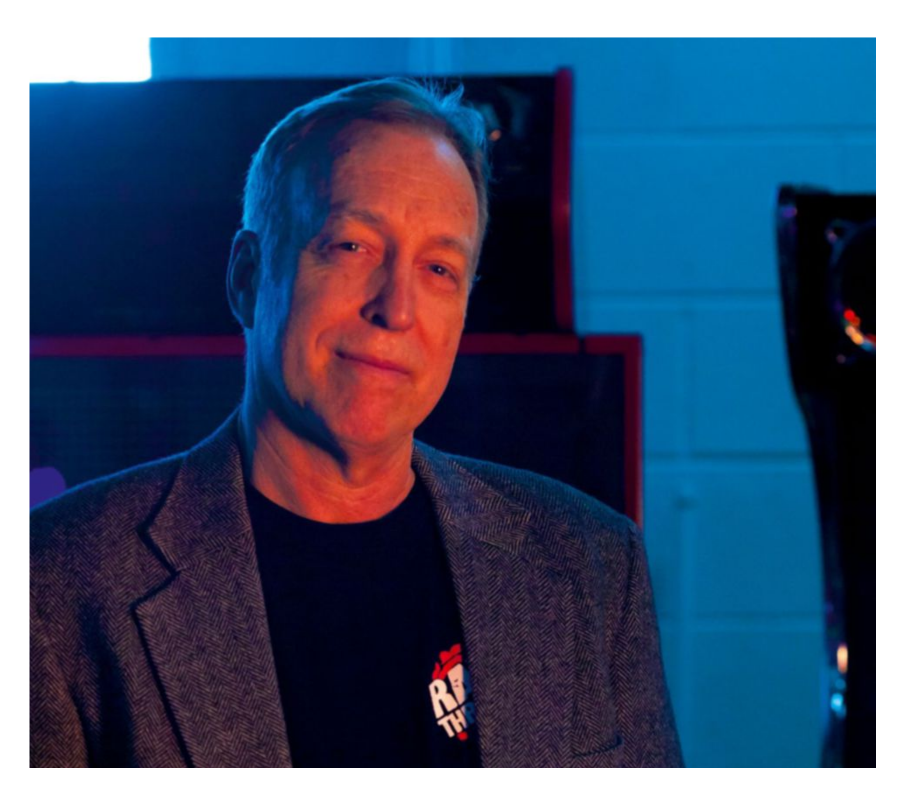
Developer Raw Thrills **Publisher** Raw Thrills, Taito **Format** Arcade **Release** 2004

This was actually a very painful project in the early going. Sadly Midway got out of the arcade business as it was a tough competitive time. This was the early 2000s and Xbox and PlayStation were getting a few iterations into their builds, and all of a sudden we weren't really any better than home consoles, or PCs. Maybe





The Fast And The Furious used a tweaked version of the *Cruis'n* engine that could achieve a solid 60fps



even worse than PCs at the time. So we were out on the street, and I was done with the industry at that point. But these guys from Midway got in touch and said, 'Let's do videogames.' And, somehow, I got sucked into starting this new videogame company called Raw Thrills. I remember waking up one morning a couple of months after that and going, 'What the fuck am I doing? What insanity is this, trying to get back into the dying arcade business?' All we really knew how to do was driving games at that point, so we started work on what was going to be this open-world, *GTA* kind of thing. You could drive anywhere you wanted and the car would deform when you hit things. We messed around for a year or two and by that point we were running out of money. We didn't know what we were going to make out of this bullshit, so we turned it into a regular old racing game.

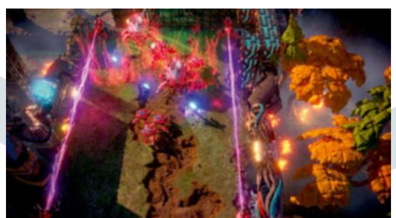
The whole street-racing thing was happening, kind of the *The Fast And The Furious* thing, and so the idea was to have this racing game in which you customised your car. We reached a point where we were like, 'OK, let's get this thing out – we've gotta make payroll at some point.' I remember we were going to call it *Hot Cars* [laughs]. For some reason I thought that was a good name, but I forget why. We went around and got some beautiful imagery, and technology had made some progress – it'd been a few years since *Cruis'n* and we were using PCs and graphics cards and we could have all kinds of shaders going on. It was beautiful-looking stuff, and then we described the game and people would say, 'Oh, you mean like *The Fast And The Furious*?' And it was like, 'Oh yeah…' I think we tried to enquire about getting a licence, and it wasn't available, so we kept working on the game and then out of the blue this friend of mine calls me up and goes, 'Hey, I can get you the licence for *Fast And Furious*, do you want it?' And it was like, 'Uh, *yes*?' So that was it, that game became what everyone thought it was! We had almost reached the end of our credit line, so when we got the thing out it really helped the company survive and it put Raw Thrills on the map.



CRUIS'N BLAST

Developer Raw Thrills, Nintendo **Publisher** Raw Thrills **Format** Arcade **Release** 2016

We did *The Fast And Furious* I don't know how many times, and you get a certain fatigue and you want to try something new. Plus I was having nostalgic feelings about the whole *Cruis'n* thing, so we decided to bring it back. We talked to people and some were like, 'Ahh, that's dead man, that thing's 20 years old, nobody gives a shit about that, you gotta bring something new to the table.' And other people go, 'Oh, that's brilliant!' Ideas are forming, you get all these different opinions and there's all this doubt, you know what I mean? Is it ever going to be anything? Is it a bad idea? Somehow you have to bullshit yourself into thinking there's something there, and not only that but you have to bullshit a team into believing that this is actually worth their life's work, too. It's kind of this leap of faith where you just have to believe it's going to be amazing. There were a lot of fans of *Cruis'n* over the years. I think there are 75,000 *Cruis'n* arcade games out there, and if you think each game was played, I dunno, maybe, 100,000 times a year, it's like millions and millions of plays. Probably billions. So it became about how we could do something that was fitting for this great series and not be an insult to it. How do we take this adventure driving to the next level? So the idea was to just have everything: amazing graphics, a Lamborghini licence, incredibly dynamic environments where there's just all kinds of shit going on and you can drive into almost anything – a lot of fruit stands, obviously, and tunnels, and huge air, and lots of flaming garbage cans to launch, and some super-crazy exotic locations. I think we succeeded on some level with *Cruis'n Blast*: it has a certain nostalgia element, but we bring it into this new technology, apply the latest graphics and all the effects, and try to get that same, cool driving experience.





Nex Machina **reimagines** ***Robotron*****'s franctic twin-stick gameplay.** ***Cruis'n Blast*** **(above) is an unapologetically over-the-top arcade racing game set across the world**

NEX MACHINA

Developer/publisher Housemarque **Format** PS4 **Release** 2017

I think every 20 years it's time for a *Robotron* game, you know? Every generation wants to give the twin-stick shooter a whirl, and it's cool. It's like poker – it's never going to get old. Housemarque has a bunch of cool ideas, and these kids are super excited, so I was like, 'What the hell, I'll see if I can throw my two cents in.' I've got a bunch of ideas, and stuff about where the *Robotron* story might have gone. When it's time to hang up your stirrups, it's like that Japanese sword thing – you just do the right thing and let the future generations take over. But I'm not ready for that just yet. ■

A V A N T

G A R D E

How Hollywood's Annapurna is bringing arthouse flair to games

By Chris Priestman



Each bedroom in the Finch household is preserved exactly how its occupant left it. Their personalities can be inferred from objects and their placement

Here's an unlikely prophecy: a Hollywood studio might produce not one but two great videogames this spring. That probably reads like a joke but it could also be the truth, unbelievable as it is given the history of cinema-videogame crossovers: most infamously that embarrassing *Super Mario Bros* film and the terrible *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* game for Atari 2600. The reason to have any faith at all in this turnaround is the arrival of Annapurna Interactive, the game-production division of Annapurna Pictures, which announced its presence to the world last December.

It has been the business of Annapurna Pictures to subvert expectations since 2011. It was founded by Megan Ellison, daughter of billionaire entrepreneur Larry Ellison, who set out to finance sophisticated and daring movies that bigger Hollywood studios deemed too risky. A big part of Ellison and her studio's tactic has been to invest in auteurs rather than franchises, countering the approach favoured by the rest of Hollywood that's epitomised by the onslaught of superhero blockbusters. While there have been some disappointments, Annapurna's biggest successes have made ripples across the indie-movie landscape, such as Spike Jonze's Her, Paul Thomas Anderson's The Master, and Kathryn Bigelow's Zero Dark Thirty.

Ellison has been known for declining to do interviews over the years. It's not necessarily because she's shy, though that might well be part of it; it's more that she would rather her work does the speaking for her. She has always led with a strong vision of what movies can be and has let that trickle down through the filmmakers she chooses to work with. The same approach has been adopted to her step into videogames. Only a single line in a press release exists to clue everyone in on what Annapurna Interactive will focus on, and that is "developing personal, emotional, and original games that push the boundaries of interactive content and encourage artists to bring new visions to the medium".

If you ask for anything more you get a blunt statement back: "The Annapurna Interactive team prefers to let the developers and games speak for themselves." If nothing else it's an invitation to examine the people the studio has under its employ. Aside from Annapurna's longtime production managers, Neale Hemrajani and James Masi, there are a number of former Sony Santa Monica crew on board. Deborah Mars, Nathan Gary, Jeff Legaspi, and Hector Sanchez have collectively worked on PlayStation titles including *God Of War*, *Hohokum*, *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture*, and *The Order: 1886*.







RITUAL REUNION

The timeline of *What Remains Of Edith Finch* spans from the early 1900s until the modern day. In those years, there has been so much tragic death in the family that it's perceived by outsiders as being cursed. To deal with their circumstance, the Finch family develop a ritual in which they seal up the dead person's room like a time capsule, and build another room on top of it for the next person to live in. This has given the Finch family estate a bizarre verticality, slowly turned into a rickety tower of ramshackle staircases and locked rooms. In this way, each member of the Finch family became an unwitting architect, building secret passages and physics-defying constructions. To look at the crooked expanse of the architecture as it stretches to the moon is to see the physical form of the Finch family's collective personality.



Giant Sparrow's creative director Ian Dallas is interested in "exploring undiscovered places"



Nearly all the stories in *Edith Finch* take place at or near the house, so the same locations and characters are interweaved across different stories



However, perhaps the most significant member of the team, as Rolling Stone discovered, is Annapurna Interactive's unexpected co-founder and 'spirit guide' Jenova Chen. The designer of award-winning emotional adventures such as *Flow*, *Flower* and *Journey* at Thatgamecompany, Chen is currently working on his next game, which is said to be "about giving" and is due to be released later this year. His presence as covert

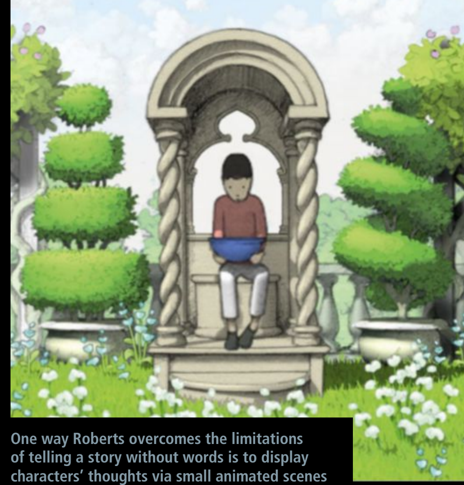
THE ONE THING EACH STORY HAS IN COMMON IS THAT THEY ALL END IN DEATH

figurehead speaks volumes about the direction Annapurna Interactive is heading.

It's probably not a coincidence that one of the first games Annapurna Interactive is producing is being co-designed by one of Chen's former colleagues, Chris Bell. He was a producer and designer on *Journey* and is currently working on the firstperson anthology game *What Remains Of Edith Finch*, due out this spring. It follows a young girl who returns to her cursed family's home in Washington state to discover the stories of her deceased ancestors by breaking into their preserved bedrooms to relive the day of their deaths through the belongings they left behind. What should be remarkable about *Edith Finch* is the way it weaves each story with such variation in tone and gameplay. In one, you're sat on a swing trying to loop over the bar; in another you're a tentacled monster snatching people off a boat; next you're a cat, leaping across the crooked branches of a tree.

The one thing each story has in common is that they all end in death. In some cases that means a child's demise; this is territory from which videogames typically shy away, but not developer Giant Sparrow. The studio's first game, *The Unfinished Swan*, combined a fairytale revealed by splashing paint across 3D environments with the much less jolly story of an orphan. With *Edith Finch*, designer Ian Dallas says that deaths aren't meant to be morbid but instead experienced as pyrrhic victories; each Finch family member marches happily towards death.

Annapurna has also signed the next title by Funomena, the San Francisco-based studio founded by Robin Hunicke and Martin Middleton, who met while working on *Journey* at Thatgamecompany. The game, *Wattam*, is the latest digital play space designed by Keita Takahashi, the enigmatic creator of ▶



One way Roberts overcomes the limitations of telling a story without words is to display characters' thoughts via small animated scenes



Katamari Damacy and *Noby Noby Boy*. While the story will have you work to unite characters who were accidentally blasted into space, the local-multiplayer component encourages you and a partner to rediscover childish tomfoolery, sabotaging each other's efforts by eating and pooping each other out, blowing each other up, and making friends with sentient flower pots and toasters. *Wattam* is less about competition or cooperation, and more about causing mischief.

Wattam doesn't currently have a release date. But that's much more than can be said for another game under Annapurna's publishing wing. The four-person team at new studio Mountains is working on an unannounced, premium-priced mobile game. The team is led by **Ken Wong**, the lead designer on one of the most praised mobile games ever made, *Monument Valley*. Wong's lips are shut tight when it comes to discussing what he's conjuring up next, but he was at least prepared to explain why he chose his new partners. "Annapurna has a great history of investing in artists, and giving them the space and support to create great work," Wong tells us. "I strongly believe that for games to grow and mature we need to bridge the gap between traditional game culture and non-gamers. Collaborating and learning from other industries like film is one way to do that."

This sentiment is repeated by **Jason Roberts**, currently the only solo act signed by Annapurna Interactive, who is finishing up work on his first game *Gorogoa*. Roberts has put his all into the game – it means a lot to him – and it's Annapurna's ability to recognise that in which he finds value. After meeting with the team, he says he was struck by its good pedigree and related to its sensibility. Roberts sees Annapurna Interactive as having a distinct, curatorial voice, and a team that selects their productions to match a certain vision for what games can be.

> "I WAS EXCITED BY THE IDEA THERE COULD BE A BRAND THAT SIGNIFIED SOMETHING"

"I was excited by the idea there could be a brand within games that signified something, that would catch peoples' attention," Roberts says. "Something like HBO, where prestige is part of, or at least a sensibility is part of how they project themselves."

Yet Roberts needn't say this, as his game says it all; it's lining up to be one of this year's most alluring pieces of interactive



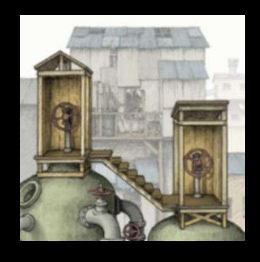


GRAPHICS NOVEL

Gorogoa was displayed at the Toronto Comic Arts Festival 2013 alongside three other games that borrow structural elements and sequential art from comics. One of those was *Framed*, a film noir-inspired narrative-puzzle game that displays animated sequences out of order and tasks you with rearranging the frames back into place. A sequel, *Framed 2*, is due out in early 2017. *Where Is My Heart?* was also shown at the festival. Its fantasy world is broken into square fragments that have to be pieced together using the varying abilities of the forest spirits who dwell within. The fourth game was *Storyteller*, which tasks you with building visual stories using props and characters. The idea is to assign them into positions across the panels of an interactive comic so that desires, monsters, and betrayals are played against each other.



Ken Wong is leading his new studio Mountains in finding fresh ways to tell interactive stories



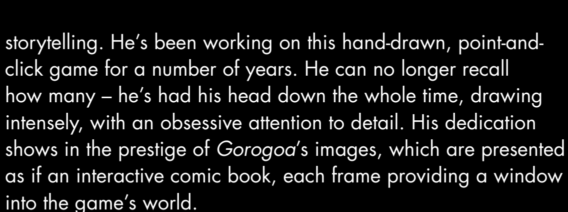










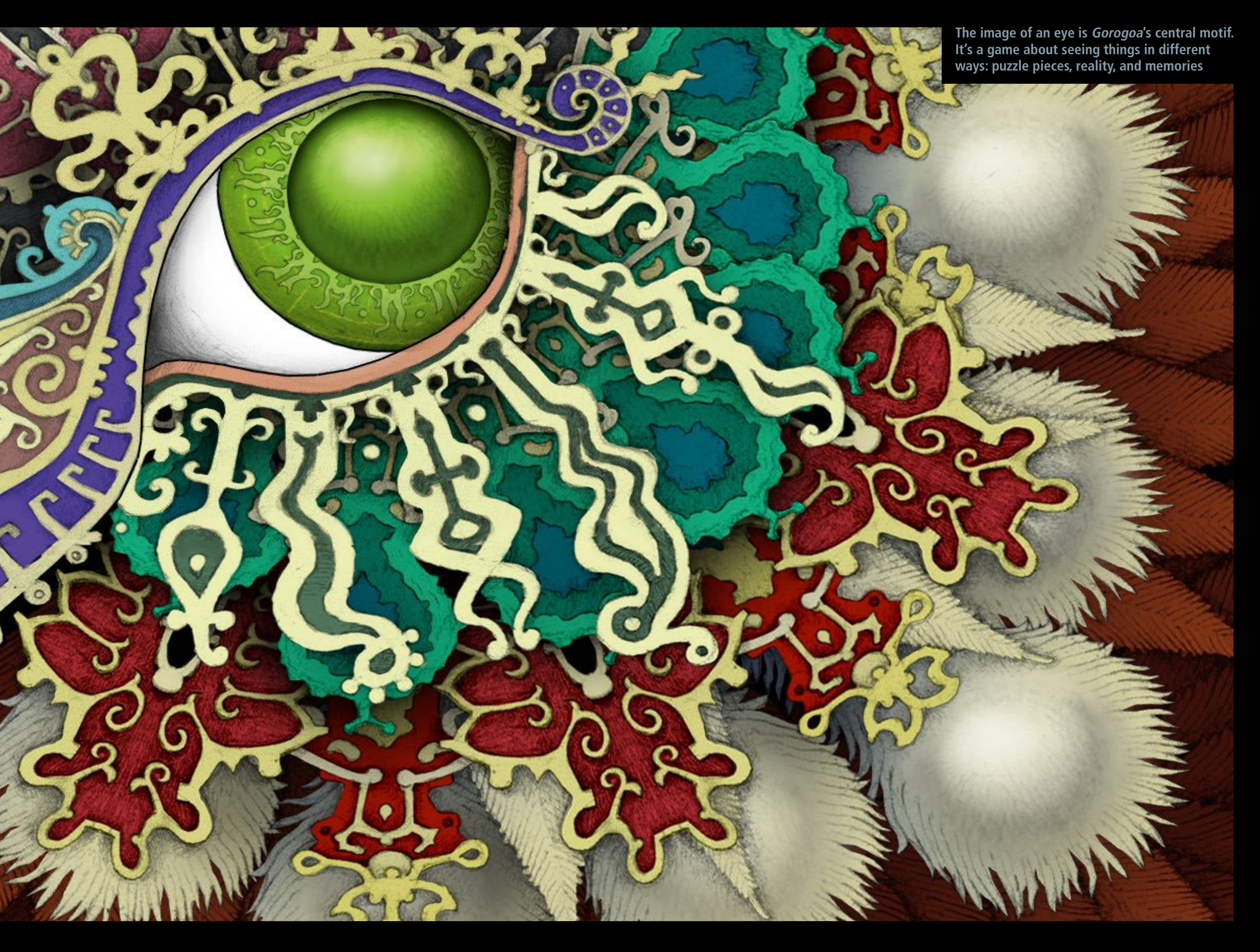


storytelling. He's been working on this hand-drawn, point-and-click game for a number of years. He can no longer recall how many – he's had his head down the whole time, drawing intensely, with an obsessive attention to detail. His dedication shows in the prestige of *Gorogoa*'s images, which are presented as if an interactive comic book, each frame providing a window into the game's world.

Every surface has its own pencilled texture, whether you're overlooking the red-shingle rooftops of a city from afar, or have zoomed right in on the furry pattern of a moth's wing. "Visually a lot of scenes have a lot of detail, which is just something I like doing," Roberts says. "I find that density gratifying. It feels like you're seeing a little cluttered corner of a larger world." There's a sense that within each image there are multiple stories to be found: a crumpled rug suggests domestic disorder, a knot in a tree begs to be looked inside, and because the game has you think in frames, each painting hanging on a wall invites the idea that inside it is yet another world to explore.

Taking it all in, it seems perfectly appropriate that Roberts thinks of *Gorogoa* as a game about devotion. "And particularly obsessive devotion to something invisible, something that lies outside of the world, outside of the material plane or what you can directly perceive," Roberts says. This idea is captured in the game at the very start, when a young boy glimpses a magical creature, and tries to chase after it. The pursuit is an easy metaphor for Roberts and his years-long dedication to getting *Gorogoa* right ("I relate to it as devotion to a creative pursuit or principle," he says). His own pursuit started as a hobby after years of working as a software engineer in and around Silicon Valley. Outside of the day job Roberts took playwriting classes. He then transitioned to making games by turning those writing lessons into an entry for an interactive fiction competition. This was when Roberts first encountered his biggest and most persistent creative challenge: his own overblown ambition.

"I was writing a game that was set in this desert, which has all these rock outcroppings, and I got really involved with the code so that, as it got later in the day, the shadows in the rock outcroppings got longer and the descriptions of each location would change," Roberts says. "This is all text, mind you: having a realtime moving sun and realtime weather, but in a text game. So, yeah, I got into the weeds there. I think I've mostly learned my lesson about that kinda thing." That failure, along with ▶



The image of an eye is *Gorogoa*'s central motif. It's a game about seeing things in different ways: puzzle pieces, reality, and memories

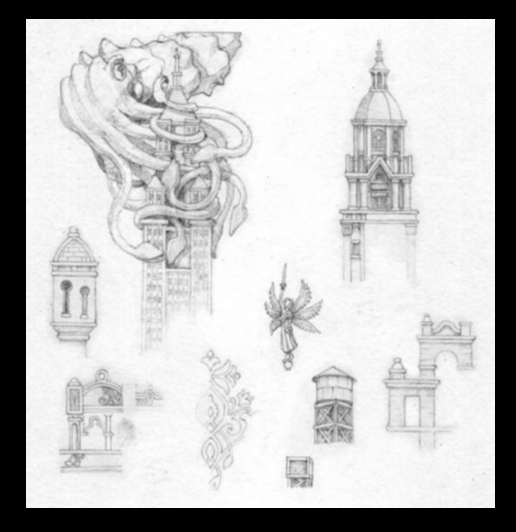
seeing so many other writers struggling to excel in their craft beyond merely dialogue, convinced Roberts that it would be better to learn to tell a story visually before using words. Naively, he thought visual storytelling was more basic than writing, and learned the hard way that the opposite is true.

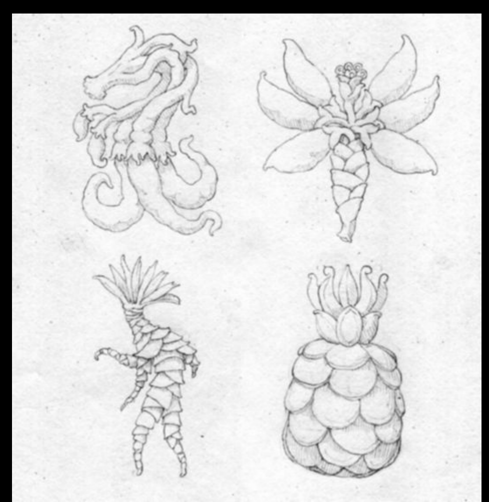
He started out by scrawling into notebooks the game-design ideas he had stored in his head for years. Mostly, these were impractical, many of them being big 3D puzzle boxes like those in *The Room*, but with worlds and cities built inside each ornament. It didn't work out. "I had decided that the design had gotten too complicated – that I should take the same mechanic and tell a simpler story," Roberts says. "In some ways, *Gorogoa* is a very simplified, flattened version of that idea."

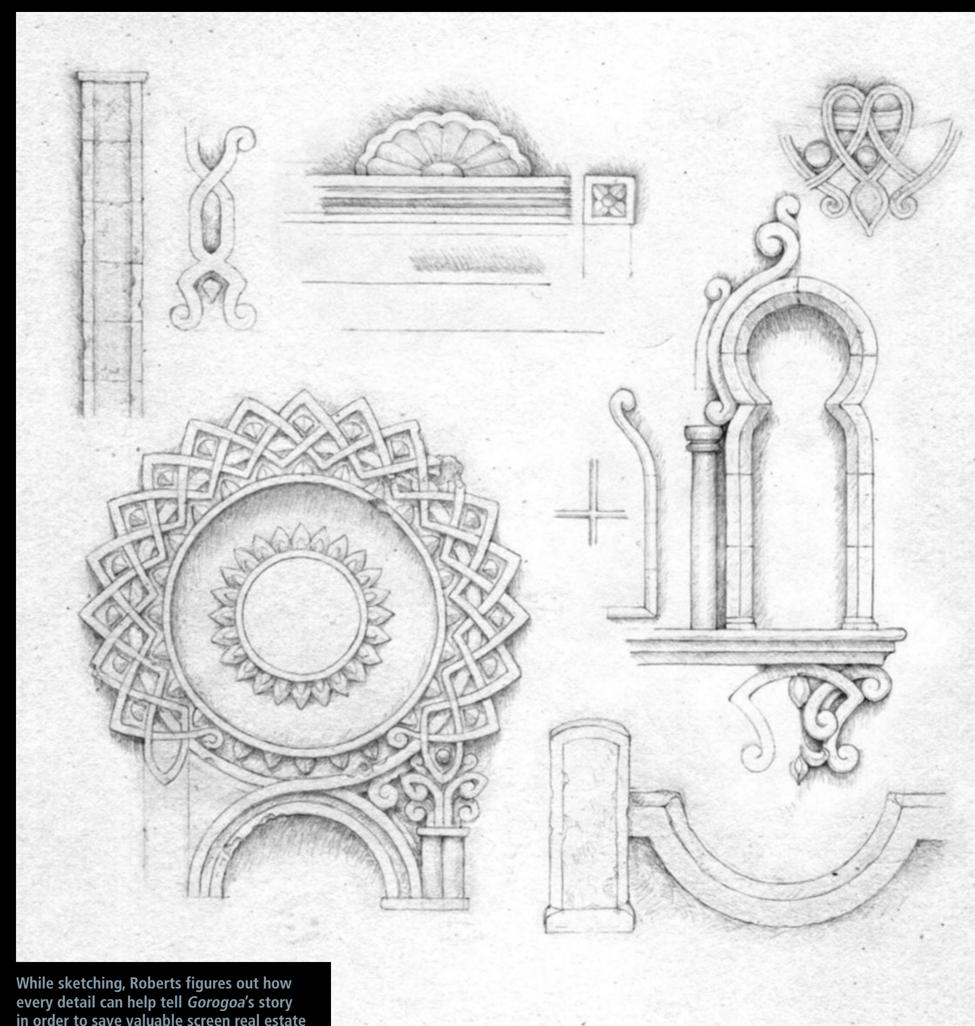
There are two reasons why *Gorogoa* took several years to get to its current near-finished state. First is the time-consuming process of creating all the artwork for the game: Roberts did it all by himself, drawing thousands of images over the course of several years, and painting them in Photoshop. He learned the techniques necessary to pull this off along the way, to the point that he had to discard the first generation of art entirely, as he "had learned so much that [his] original artwork became unacceptable". He reckons in those first years he had done probably five times as many drawings on the game as he had done in his whole life up until that point.

Job done, you'd think, but no: next, Roberts realised he had to overhaul many of the game's hand-drawn spaces and characters. His initial idea was to make a puzzle game using the language of comic-book frames. In *Gorogoa*, each frame acts as a window into one of the game's locations, and the view can be moved around to reveal new objects and perspectives, either by zooming in or out, or panning across a flat plane. It's also possible to rearrange the position and order of the frames. These mechanics have been in place since very early on in development, but what Roberts struggled with was how to marry them to the game's story. "Had I known what kind of story I wanted to tell from the beginning, and what all the scenes should be, the scope would have been manageable," Roberts says. "It was just figuring out where in that possibility space the game laid. That's what's so time consuming."

As Roberts explains it now, *Gorogoa* seems to have locked wonderfully into place, with the mechanics and story coming together to express "the idea that there is this hidden meaning or structure in the world around us, but that in a sense can only be perceived from outside of the world". Viewing the game world







While sketching, Roberts figures out how every detail can help tell *Gorogoa*'s story in order to save valuable screen real estate

through frames creates the distance necessary to understand it from a different perspective than its protagonist, almost as if the player is a god. Roberts plays with this convention both mechanically and thematically throughout, as the frames must be rearranged to connect the world inside in a way that transcends time and space. "I think of that as a metaphor for miracles," Roberts says. "The way they work is incomprehensible from our plane of existence. The square borders that make up the game represent the confinement of the ordinary material world. And violating those frames is what it means to transcend that world."

"THE WAY THEY WORK IS INCOMPREHENSIBLE FROM OUR PLANE OF EXISTENCE"

For Roberts, the idea of miracles is an important part of the game's themes. While it starts with a boy chasing a magical creature, as the game unfolds it becomes a multi-layered story, following that same boy at different points in his life, but still trying to comprehend that initial experience. That the game is about devotion to a creative pursuit is only one interpretation. Roberts also thinks that it talks to the idea of religious faith, and also adds that he sees the reordering of the frames, each of which contains a fragment of a single life, as being representative of memory.

Roberts is in his early 40s now, and talks about the process of looking back over his life, "rearranging and reinterpreting and recombining fragments of memory to attempt to construct an order to your own experience". It's an exercise that encourages a person to think over the achievements in their life so far, and to compare them with their childhood aspirations. As such, Roberts also sees *Gorogoa* as being "about the difference between what that devotion means to a child and what it means to an adult".

There's a lot to unpack within the dense images and multifaceted interactions of *Gorogoa*. At first glance it strikes you with its beauty, but in exploring its form it comes into focus as something much more profound and sophisticated. As with the other games in Annapurna Interactive's lineup, it manages to appeal to our childhood playfulness while also talking to us on a more pensive level about the human experience. Annapurna Interactive was right: it doesn't have to say a thing about its vision. The games it has chosen to publish say it all. ■

THE MAKING OF...



DESTRUCTION DERBY

On the crest of a console revolution, how one small British studio broke the rules to create a smashing new racer

By Ed Smith

Developer Reflections Interactive
Publisher Psygnosis
Format PlayStation
Origin UK
Release 1995

By the summer of 1995, in its native Japan, Sony's PlayStation had already shipped more than two million units. Its American and European launches were now imminent. True 3D graphics, which would allow gamers to tangibly enact once-distant dreams, were about to globally arrive. Ten years and 100 million sales later, the PlayStation would leave behind a wealthier, more intelligent and more widely admired videogame culture. For many people, it would become the console to convince them games deserved attention. But on the eve of its worldwide success, with the old standards of games and game-making about to be left behind, developers were under pressure. The most reliable genres, from side-scroller to shoot-'em-up, were about to leave vogue, never to fully return. Creative opportunities permitted by 3D were offset constantly by the struggles of designing for new and complex hardware.

Sitting in his office in Newcastle Upon Tyne, **Martin Edmondson**, the co-founder of Reflections Interactive, which until then had made its money on the BBC Micro and Commodore Amiga, was thousands of miles from PlayStation ground zero. But in the summer of 1995, when temperatures in Britain reached upwards of 35°C and rainfall hit a record low, he was feeling the heat in more ways than one. *Destruction Derby*, his studio's first PlayStation game, was on a tight schedule. In just seven months, on a budget of £250,000 and with a development staff of seven, it had to be started, finished and shipped. Videogames were about to change; Edmondson, Reflections and *Destruction Derby* were battling to keep up.

"We wanted *Destruction Derby* to coincide with the PlayStation's European launch," Edmondson tells us. "That meant a very compressed development: seven days a week, every week. We didn't know the performance of the machine. Like any manufacturer, Sony would tell you, 'These are the gigaflops, this is what it can do.' But when we were working on it properly there were always bottlenecks and problems. Then again, 3D was a really new thing. As game designers, the complete 3D visualisation of any idea represented one of our wildest dreams come true. So, we were riding the wave of a lot of enthusiasm."

Intrigued by the possibilities of Sony's new machine, Edmondson and his colleagues were also bolstered by one of the platform holder's newest subsidiaries. Psygnosis, the Liverpool-based studio that had previously published Reflections' Amiga games, including *Shadow Of The Beast*, had recently been bought out by Sony, and was now helping to finance the development of PlayStation games throughout Europe. This gave Reflections a foot in the door. Trusted by Psygnosis already, Edmondson and company had been swiftly able to sell the idea for a new form of racing game. If PlayStation was about to throw out dozens of the old videogame standards, it only followed that a racer in which crashing your car was the key to victory should feature on the platform.



Developed inside just seven months, *Destruction Derby* was originally inspired by the game's lead designer Martin Edmondson's childhood love for stock-car and banger racing

"THE COMPLETE 3D VISUALISATION OF ANY IDEA REPRESENTED ONE OF OUR WILDEST DREAMS COME TRUE"

"We had an early introduction to the hardware specs and were asked if we could come up with any original ideas to do on the machine," Edmondson explains. "I was already enthusiastic about the whole area anyway – when I was a kid, I used to go and watch destruction derbies with my dad. So I created a very simple seven- or eight-page document, to try and get across how a game based around destruction, rather than destruction just being a side effect, would work. That was the headline for our design. For the first time we'd focus on the action, the satisfaction and the realism of crashing. The rest of that original design document described the game modes and the skills that would be involved. You couldn't have players just drive head-on into other cars or they'd take out their own car, so we explained how, for example, spinning a car 180 degrees would earn you points, and spinning it 360 degrees would earn you even more points.

"Racing games at the time, if they featured cars from real life, weren't allowed to damage them – manufacturers weren't keen on having their cars portrayed like they were dangerous. Technical limitations prohibited car damage as well. So we imagined these kind of box cars, which looked a bit – but not exactly – like Ford Granadas and Cortinas from the '80s. They were simple. The rest of the pitch was dedicated to how we would achieve the damage."

To create the broken-up appearances of *Destruction Derby*'s cars, Reflections attended real-life stock races, and captured photographs of each competing vehicle before, during and after they'd been out on the track. "We took pictures from dead front, dead rear and dead side each time they came back to the pits," Edmondson says. "But more often than not a car would be so obliterated that we couldn't acquire a texture from it! It took hundreds of races before we finally had the material we needed."

After the photographs had been acquired, Reflections began work on a system that would progressively add visible damage to cars based on how many times they had been hit: rather than create the individual models for a clean car, a partially damaged car and a wrecked car by hand, *Destruction Derby*'s programmers added to each car model a series of 'morph points' – invisible detectors that, after registering a certain amount of collisions, would instantaneously swap out one vehicle texture for another. At 30fps, the speed at which Reflections was determined *Destruction Derby* would run, the process would be imperceptible.

"At 30fps the PlayStation could throw around thousands of fully textured polygons," **Phil Baxter**, *Destruction Derby*'s graphics and texture artist, says. "The textures in *Destruction Derby* were colourised, had decals and artwork applied, and were then palletised to 8bit and 256 colours. Coming from the Amiga, which struggled to render a flat shaded scene ▶

comprised of just a few hundred polygons and where everything was drawn by hand, pixel by pixel, using a palette of just eight or 16 colours, this was a huge change on every front. But none of us really knew what we were doing. Even the PS1 development kit – one of the first in the country, which we'd managed to get from Psygnosis – had no sound, no CD drive and all its instruction manuals were in Japanese."

To hurry things along, Psygnosis bought a collection of workstations from a US company, Silicon Graphics, which typically supplied 3D-modelling tools to the film industry. Reflections, meanwhile, hired a coder, **Robert Troughton**. Along with Edmondson, he began work on *Destruction Derby*'s tracks and opponent AI. By now, however, the PlayStation's European launch date, September 29, was beginning to creep up. Not only did Reflections need to ramp up development – it had to start making cuts, too.

"The AI we originally wrote for *Destruction Derby* was much more complicated than what made it into the final game," Troughton says. "The problem was, the tracks were relatively small and we were cramming onto them 20 separate racing cars. We'd taught the AI how to do three-point turns when they'd been spun around and how to recover from bad crashes, but they'd get halfway into these manoeuvres and find that another car was slamming into them. The more complicated we made the AI, the stupider it would appear."

"We'd had stuff up and running on the PlayStation very quickly," Edmondson continues. "We'd gotten a triangle up on the screen within a day. Within a week, we had our first car rotating so we could observe all its panels. But when it came to the actual racing we had a whole different set of rules. It had to work like a racing game, but also we needed AI that would crash into you and respond properly if you crashed into it, and not just lock back onto the road. So we built our tracks like Scalextric. They were divided into pieces and the AI would read what piece of the track was coming up next and adjust its steering and speed in kind. After that we started to alter behaviour based on proximity of other cars. Some were very aggressive. Some were timid. It was about building blocks, really."

To *Destruction Derby*'s AI, the tracks were assorted and complex. For players, they were simple. Much of the game's memory had already been dedicated to the cars themselves – the myriad polygons and morph points on each vehicle made damage appear detailed and seamless, but did not leave Reflections much space when it came to creating backgrounds, scenery and race courses. A forest, a beach front, a canyon: to generate an instant sense of diversity, *Destruction Derby*'s six tracks were based on racing-game staples. They were all completely flat – the game's physics engine was so dedicated to illustrating damage that cars could never leave the ground anyway – and could all be completed in mere minutes. Reflections ensured each course had a distinct signature feature: The Bowl was a wide, concrete circle, specifically designed for crashing and brawling; Crossover encouraged conventional racing, but included in its middle a four-way junction, resulting in massive, spectacular pile-ups. Simple creative flourishes like these kept production of *Destruction Derby* humming along.

Nevertheless, Reflections was forced to make difficult choices. To begin with, it had planned to include a track-editor feature, which would allow players to clip together, using those Scalextric pieces, their own courses. But as the end of September grew closer, it had to be cut. Multiplayer mode created challenges, too. Split-screen multiplayer would mean rendering each track and all 20 AI cars twice through the same PlayStation, leading to a dramatic slowing of the all-important framerate. Reflections instead opted to incorporate Sony's Link Cable, which would connect two consoles together and transmit game and player information between them. Throughout development, however, it proved problematic.

"The Link Cable was a complete nightmare," Edmondson says. "All it could send, really, was pad input data: player one is pressing X, player one is pressing right, and so on. And if anything wasn't sent, it fell all out of sync. We spent hundreds and hundreds of hours getting that right. Day in, day out, we were fixing bugs. A week before master it was still drifting out of sync."

Destruction Derby's intense development had taken a toll on Reflections. "We were all living on junk food," Baxter recalls. "With no office cleaner we were soon surrounded by empty pizza boxes – by the time we were finished, the place was full of flies." Still, the game launched to rave reviews, just after the PlayStation's European release. The 3D revolution had begun and Reflections, by rapidly producing a racer that either bent or broke genre conventions, had managed to get in on the ground floor – just about, anyway.

"It wasn't there on launch day and that was frustrating," Edmondson says. "But we'd hosted press days and just from the looks on journalists' faces we'd known we were onto something. The PlayStation had a lot of US and Japanese games. *Destruction Derby* was British, and that earned us a lot of goodwill. We were helped by riding the wave of a new console, but it sold very well."

"When I joined Reflections it was just Martin," Baxter says. "I had no experience in designing games. We were basically teenagers, living away from home. We all mucked in wherever we could and the long hours became part of the fun. *Destruction Derby* was just an adventure." ■



Martin Edmondson
Lead designer

Where did you first get the idea to make a game about destruction derby?
We'd seen *Ridge Racer*, which was already out in Japan, but we hadn't taken anything from it. The game was a result of a personal passion for stock-car racing. In the '80s I'd go and watch it live, or on Grandstand or World Of Sport. The courses were little more than these muddy bowls, but the sport, back then, was quite well known.

As first-time PlayStation developers, what tools, if any, were available to you?
The first PlayStation development kits were about the size of a photocopier, but you couldn't use them to build an intricate 3D mesh or a car model because the only way you could interact with them was with a game pad. They didn't have a bespoke modelling tool either. So, Psygnosis provided us with a kit that came with a modelling tool, called Softimage. We used that to build the cars then ran the blank 3D models through our in-house texturing tool. It took a few days to build a model and you'd have to make a lot of optimisations to save polygons. True circular wheels, for example, would waste lots of polygons. The textures make them look circular but they actually aren't.

Was there much secrecy around the console?
Our office had to be secure. We had to sign a lot of stuff. The people working directly on the machine had to be very clear about their obligations and any other companies they might be working for. But it was only natural. This was a machine that for years had been kept under lock and key in Japan, and suddenly it was in an office in Newcastle. It wasn't an insignificant thing to be responsible for.







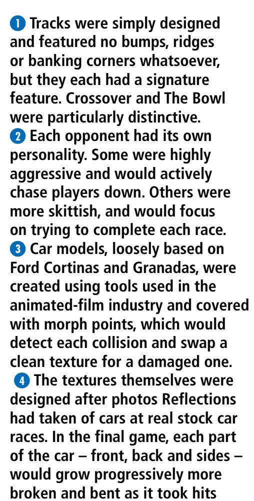












1 Tracks were simply designed and featured no bumps, ridges or banking corners whatsoever, but they each had a signature feature. Crossover and The Bowl were particularly distinctive.
2 Each opponent had its own personality. Some were highly aggressive and would actively chase players down. Others were more skittish, and would focus on trying to complete each race.
3 Car models, loosely based on Ford Cortinas and Granadas, were created using tools used in the animated-film industry and covered with morph points, which would detect each collision and swap a clean texture for a damaged one.
4 The textures themselves were designed after photos Reflections had taken of cars at real stock car races. In the final game, each part of the car – front, back and sides – would grow progressively more broken and bent as it took hits





STUDIO PROFILE

FIREPROOF GAMES

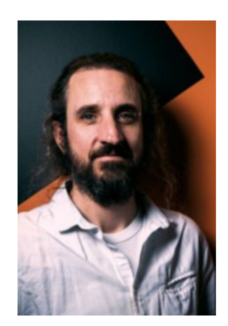
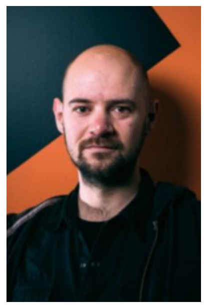
Why outsourcing frustrations led a group of Criterion alumni to create their ideal company

By Ben Maxwell

Fireproof Games' commercial director and co-founder **Barry Meade** is warm and welcoming when we arrive – he immediately asks how we like our tea – but he's feeling slightly downhearted. The studio behind *The Room* series is set to move to larger offices shortly, and Meade is disappointed that our visit has occurred too soon for him to show off the new digs. He takes heart in the fact that the cosy current premises are still scattered with years of awards, artwork and desk trinkets instead. Fireproof is, after all, a charismatic studio, and we would much rather see it spread out in its natural state than packed away into moving boxes.

Fireproof's founders bonded at Criterion Studios while working as artists on the *Burnout* series. By the time *Burnout Paradise* was in production, the collective had all ascended to senior art roles and formed a tightly knit, productive team. When that working relationship was threatened, however, they were forced to take action.

"There was a lot of talk internally after *Paradise* about what was going to happen next with the studio," Fireproof's creative director and co-founder **Mark Hamilton** tells us. "We were concerned that we were going to start being ferried off to dive into different projects – a little bit of that, a little bit of this – and we felt like we wanted to stay together as a team."

From left: Commercial director Barry Meade and creative director Mark Hamilton, both also Fireproof co-founders

Founded 2008
Employees 16
Key staff Chris Cannon (designer, artist), Tony Cartwright (animator, artist), Mark Hamilton (designer, artist), Barry Meade (commercial director), Damien Rayfield (artist), Dave Rack (artist)
URL www.fireproofgames.com
Selected softography *The Room, The Room Two, The Room Three, Omega Agent*
Current projects *The Room: Old Sins*

The natural solution to this problem, of course, was to start their own company. Given their skillset, it made sense to work with other studios and the six Criterion alumni were, ironically, inspired by the difficulties they'd faced working with external art companies during their time on *Paradise*.

"We had gone through a period making *Burnout Paradise* where we had dealt a lot with outsourcing and found it massively lacking," Hamilton says. "We thought we could do a better version of outsourcing as a way to get a wage in and start a company. And Media Molecule had, like, one-and-a-half environment artists at that point, so they were like, 'We may actually have work for a team of guys like you if you did start up.' We thought, 'Oh right, there's at least one client.' That was enough to make us go: 'Well, why not?'"

Despite the significant gamble, none of Fireproof's founders had any doubts about the validity of their plan. "We thought, 'If we were in this position making a triple-A game, we know that there are 20 other triple-A games being made in the UK and they're bound to have the same problems that we have,'" Meade says. "I was sure everyone was in the same position that we were."

Determined to stay together, and encouraged by a solid business plan, the group founded Fireproof in 2008. It couldn't have been more badly timed. The financial crisis hit soon after and, while Media Molecule remained a regular client, much of the other work that Fireproof had provisionally lined up began to disappear.

"That period was hellish," Meade tells us. "We started in September, and that Christmas we had some subsistence money – our quitting money, basically – but it was so bad, we were just like, 'We literally can't run the company anymore, and if nothing changes, we're going to come back in January and wrap it up.'"

Meade and his colleagues were prepared to spend every penny of their savings to keep the company going for long enough to build some momentum. Their confidence was buoyed, too, by the fact that they had all worked as leads on a huge game; even if the company *did* fail, it wouldn't have been hard to find work. Even so, the uncertainty over the studio's future took its toll, and it was no small relief when the founders' commitment started to pay off the following year. The phone started to ring – something Meade predominantly puts down to the financial year ending – and business started to pick up. But there was still an uphill struggle to deal with due to the team's unusual vision for an outsourcing company, one that was initially met with significant resistance.

"Today, it's pretty much a given that if you're making a massive game it's going to be [done with] satellite studios all over the world," says Hamilton. "It's not just outsourcing where a company is delivering assets back to the main studio; it's a studio over here for this bit of the game, a studio over there for that bit of the game. That's kind of what we were trying to do back then. We were part of the studio, but we were off-site – we would be part of the team making the game. We weren't just going to create some buildings to plug into the levels. We'd build the level for you."

"WE WERE CHEAP, TOO. IT WASN'T JUST PEOPLE THINKING, 'OH, YOU'RE AWESOME, WE'LL TOTALLY HIRE YOU'"

"It just wasn't done," Meade adds. "No one was outsourcing design back then – certainly not artistic, level or environment design. I mean, you could be involved in building an environment, but you weren't designing it. Someone else was doing that. Whereas we were trying to say to people, 'If you give us the whole job, you have so much less to think about, right? So in that way we're being a much more effective outsourcer.'

"People didn't believe it at first. I think we got a lot of custom from people who heard what we said, went away and tried the other options, and then came back to us after six months or a year of having a bad time and said, 'Yeah, maybe your thing will work now.' We were cheap, too: we weren't trying to make loads of money out of people. It wasn't just people thinking, 'Oh, you're awesome, we'll totally hire you'; it was a package, and part of that was that we never got greedy. It took time, and in the first year, it was just like, 'Nope. Nope. Nope.' But all we





"We don't know what the future holds because we're kind of following our noses," Meade explains. "We have money in the bank that allows us to do that, and that just allows us to do the next project that we really want to do, not the one we feel forced to do"

needed to do was to survive long enough for these people to come back to us, and that's what ended up happening."

The team had another ace up its sleeve, which helped to smooth the transition. "Our super-specialist racing expertise helped, I think," Hamilton tells us. "Personally, I ended up working on racing games, and racing-game prototypes, for about three years for various companies. There was a point where me and one of the other guys had worked on almost every racing game that was coming out in the next two-year period. We knew everything about every racing game on the planet at that point."

But while the team was particularly well-suited to racing games, Fireproof was fearless when it came to tackling less familiar territory, too. "We were getting thrown a new engine or art style every six months," Hamilton says. "I certainly learnt more in those first three years than I did in a lot of the time before that. I was picking up new skills, and we were getting pitches for contracts and going, 'Can we do a cel-shaded, hand-painted thing? Why not? Can we do a scribbled, hand-drawn, Sesame Street Kinect game? Yeah, let's go for it!' Seeing the idiosyncrasies of everyone's engine was a massive education and definitely made us all better as artists. And then, obviously, we were running a company, too, so we had all that responsibility as well. It was something that none of us were prepared for, and had to pick up as we went along."

Even as Fireproof's outsourcing revolution was taking place, the team knew that it wanted to make its own games eventually. The plan was always to create something original within five or six years of starting the company, but the focus at that time was on a console or PC release – formats in which the company was well-versed. When Fireproof found itself in a position to actually start developing something, the staff very quickly realised that they simply couldn't afford to produce a game on PSN or Xbox Live.

"We were faced with a decision: remain freelance artists, or pick up Unity and have a go at a mobile game," Meade recalls. "Mobile wasn't on our radar at all, and it meant we wouldn't be in our comfort zone, but at least we would still be making a videogame. It would be *ours*, and if we did our best with it, we'd be proud of it at the end even if it was on a platform we didn't know or really understand. It doesn't really matter as long as the work is good. That's why we made *The Room*, because we were forced into it. We had other game ideas that we were planning for console or PC, but none of them was this."

When development began on *The Room*, Fireproof was still working on multiplayer levels for *Killzone Shadow Fall*. A small team broke off from that project; Fireproof brought a programmer on board – another former Criterion colleague – and the game began to take shape relatively quickly. Released in September 2012, almost exactly four years after Fireproof's founding, *The Room* quickly proved popular, racking up 200,000 downloads in its first three months.

"We made our money back and then a little bit more, so it was like, 'Cool, we've done alright, let's do another one,'" says Hamilton. "But then Christmas happened, and we got iPad Game Of The Year and quadrupled our sales instantly. At that point it was, 'Fuck, we can shut everything else down and just do this full-time.'"

Existing contracts still had to be completed, but *The Room*'s tremendous, rapid success meant that Fireproof no longer needed to look for work elsewhere. Three instalments of *The Room* later, and with VR jetpack spy-training game *Omega Agent* also released, Fireproof's willingness to take risks and commit to unproven strategies has paid off for the fiercely independent studio.

"BUT THEN CHRISTMAS HAPPENED, AND WE GOT IPAD GAME OF THE YEAR AND QUADRUPLED OUR SALES INSTANTLY"

"I think we're the kind of company that will jump from one thing to the next," Meade says. "We're not really going to plough the same furrow. I mean, obviously, we're going to make lots of *The Room* games – that's different, though, as *The Room* is kind of special to us. But we go out of our way to do 'not-*Rooms*' whenever we get a chance. I think that's kind of got us where we are today.

"When we made *The Room*, we had no reason to believe it was going to take off. There was no Apple featuring, or anything like that. We won iPad Game Of The Year six months after release – none of that was there at the beginning. We were just a bunch of artists who hired one programmer to help them make a game on mobile. But I remember saying to the guys, 'If we put all our effort into this and do something that we think is really great, and we release it and it absolutely bombs, we at least have a really good piece of work that we can hold our heads up with.'" The team ended up with an awful lot more than that. ■



1 The James Bond and *Pilotwings*-inspired VR game *Omega Agent* sees players train to be a spy with a jetpack in the '60s. 2 *The Room*'s intricate puzzle boxes are a perfect showcase for touchscreens. 3 *The Room Two* expanded on the first game with more complex contraptions and puzzles. 4 *The Room Three* is the latest game in the puzzle series, and its darkest yet

PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild
Switch
BOTW director Hidemaro Fujibayashi suggested some players might attempt to complete the game with Link in his underwear. We didn't expect to face a similar challenge: a remote island transforms *Zelda* into a survival sim, as Link is stripped of his gear, and forced to scavenge food and weapons to stay alive. It's a delightfully fraught half-hour of living on your wits; how extraordinary that it should be tucked away where plenty of players will miss it.

The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild
Switch
In case you were wondering, it holds up just fine your second time through. This Hyrule is so impossibly, unknowably vast, that only the weirdest sort of completionist will manage to see it all on a single playthrough. And even if they do, they're unlikely to remember it. The beauty of *Breath Of The Wild* lies in the fact that, whichever direction you head in, it feels like an adventure all your own. It's a feeling that more than persists into a second run.

The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild
Switch
On the edge of a forest a bard sings of a certain nearby shrine, and there goes our evening. We spend most of it trying to clear out a Bokoblin camp during a persistent electrical storm; of course, all our best weapons are metal. The camp falls eventually, but an even larger threat soon stops us in our tracks. We never did find that shrine. It's a rare game in which you can spend three hours achieving nothing, and not have it matter at all.



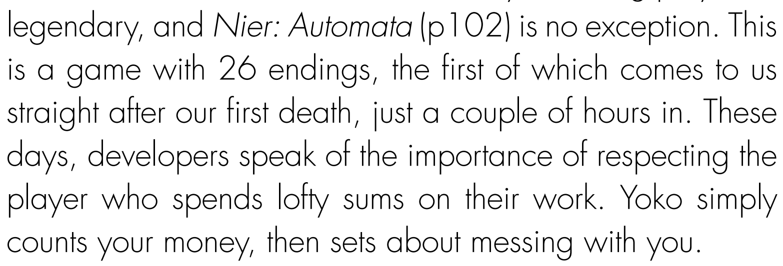
Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Play content

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

Griefing process

For Honor (p112) might just be the most honestly titled videogame ever. While presumably intended to invoke the spirit of good, old-fashioned, bloodthirsty sword combat, the game's name is also a perfect descriptor for how its multiplayer matches play out. Ubisoft Montreal has surely primarily designed this PVP brawler to let players duke it out honourably. Yet it's also been crafted with a mischievous eye, understanding that sometimes the notion of doing the right thing can get stuffed. You'll throw foes off high walkways to their doom. You will bait out a mistake, then kick them into a river of lava. Griefing used to be an unfortunate by-product of the MMO. Now, in a host of genres, it's increasingly part of the design document.

It's even spread to the singleplayer game, and this month's selection of releases contains the latest work of the master of it. Yoko Taro's history of trolling players is legendary, and *Nier: Automata* (p102) is no exception. This is a game with 26 endings, the first of which comes to us straight after our first death, just a couple of hours in. These days, developers speak of the importance of respecting the player who spends lofty sums on their work. Yoko simply counts your money, then sets about messing with you.





Needless to say, however, it's not an approach for everyone. Players can make each others' lives a temporary misery, and a mischievous developer can by all means poke their player with a pointy stick. But woe betide the publisher that thinks it can do the same to its customer. With *Super Bomberman R* (p123), Konami has thrown together a cheap and nasty nostalgia play – and it's £50. Suffice it to say, we suggest you spend your money elsewhere, on something made by a developer who knows the difference between poking fun, and flat-out disrespect.

Nier: Automata

Developer PlatinumGames
Publisher Square Enix
Format PC, PS4 (tested)
Release Out now

Less than an hour in, all our concerns are addressed. Until then, *Automata* has borne all the attributes of a typical PlatinumGames joint: dynamic action, a protagonist who moves and fights with balletic grace, and a dodge to die for. Then suddenly, a combination of overconfidence and an unhelpful camera angle (a rarity, happily) leads to a premature arrival of the dreaded grey screen of death. A caption laments our failure, before an accelerated credit crawl reveals that we've hit an ending: one, it turns out, of 26 possible conclusions. Another arrives five hours later when we inadvertently take the scenic route to a mission objective and are admonished for having abandoned our post – though at least this time we're not deposited back at the start. In other words, anyone wondering whether Yoko Taro would be able to stamp his – let's be polite – idiosyncratic personality on the follow-up to Cavia's 2010 cult favourite can rest easy. And be assured that there's much more of this sort of thing to come.

Beyond a similarly downbeat tone, there appears to be little to connect *Automata* to its predecessor at first: Yoko has seemingly severed all narrative ties by setting this sequel almost 3,000 years later. In the interim, aliens have unleashed an army of powerful, intelligent machines that have all but annihilated humanity, forcing the last of us to vacate the Earth and find safe haven on the Moon. Naturally, we miss the old place, and so we've sent down an elite resistance force of androids to battle the machines and reclaim the planet. Enter combat unit 2B, whose cool, detached outlook is tested as she finds herself increasingly perturbed by the machines' human-like behaviours. Her companion, 9S – a unit primarily designed for scanning rather than fighting – is more immediately likeable, with his amusing bellyaching and sarcastic responses to orders. Yet he's unmoved by the machines, and troublingly keen to keep 2B focused on her objective when she begins to waver.

It's here, as anyone who played beyond *Nier*'s climax will recognise, *Automata* finds more obvious common ground with its predecessor, as Yoko further probes the idea of what it means to be human. After the credits have rolled on the first proper ending, there's a warning to keep playing: no doubt Square Enix is aware too few players saw beyond *Nier*'s first conclusion, which left plenty unsaid. To anyone with even a passing interest in Yoko's work, it's no spoiler to say the same happens here – if the conclusion feels flat on a first viewing, it's lent additional texture and meaning with insights gained from subsequent playthroughs (see Post Script). While at times the storytelling seems erratic and episodic, it still boasts remarkable focus and thematic consistency. Indeed, a recurring idea is that humanity's flaws are what make us so elusive and fascinating.

Some wags might suggest that's a handy get-out for *Automata*'s world, a desolate sandbox with a few too many empty spaces and invisible barriers. It's rather ugly in places, too. Sometimes that's a conscious aesthetic choice, as Platinum's artists attempt to evoke the bleakness of a post-apocalyptic Earth. At others, however, it's plain drab, and while some environmental shortcomings are no doubt a trade-off to ensure fights run smoothly, some textures will induce the odd wince. There are, however, moments of real beauty. A battle within a daringly sparse desert region sees bipedal behemoths emerging through a sandy haze, silhouetted against a low-hanging sun. And a rusted, overgrown theme park conjures some arresting images, including a side-scrolling ride past a Disney-style castle aboard a still-functional rollercoaster.

> The eyes of your opponents will glow red as they're about to launch an attack, a helpful signal that it's time to dodge



Then the robots approach, 2B readies her sword, and the Platinum we all know takes over. Combat is a little more straightforward than in the studio's finest work, but in terms of feel 2B's fighting style is closer to Bayonetta than Korra. It's based around simple, light-and-heavy combo strings that can be extended if you've got the right weapon at the right level; a short sword handles appreciably differently from a spear, even if the inputs are the same. The eyes of your opponents will glow red as they're about to launch an attack, a helpful signal that it's time to dodge, and you're given a generous window to react. Still, that's only fair given how often the odds are overwhelmingly against you, and the hint of a red flash is essential when your lock-on (which is disabled on the Hard and Very Hard difficulty settings) spins you to face one enemy while another winds up a powerful axe slash behind you.

You may be grateful for the ability to spam dodge when facing a hail of projectiles but the perfect evade is worth mastering – though again, the input window is forgiving. Pull it off and 2B will appear as a shimmering outline, which leaves her invulnerable throughout the animation and allows you to respond with an immediate and powerful counter. With the Square button you can launch an enemy, automatically leaping to meet them mid-flight to repeatedly slash them, or you can fire an explosive close-range blast by tapping R1. But then you probably already had your right index finger clamped down on the button, since doing so means your companion pod will produce an unbroken stream of machine-gun fire that pecks away at an opponent's health bar. With a selection of special attacks (none of which quite matches the devastating force of the default laser) subject to cooldown timers, your floating ally can do much of the hard work while you remain at a safe distance. It's a coward's tactic, but with the right equipment and buffs it's disarmingly effective.

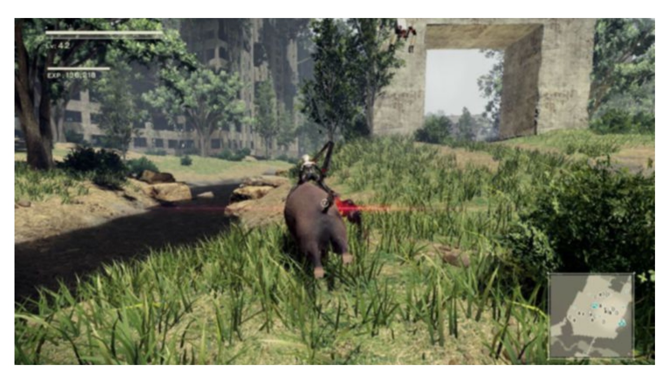
The fundamentals of combat change little from beginning to end, but the degree of control you have over 2B's loadout allows you to tweak your approach as ▶



ABOVE Composer Keiichi Okabe and vocalist Emi Evans return for a soundtrack that almost matches the peerless original. During one memorable moment, a group of machines repeatedly chant "become as gods", which adds a haunting backdrop to the darkly percussive theme that plays over the subsequent action.
LEFT When your own weapons aren't enough to finish off a boss, why not reach for a bigger gun? Firing a weapon of this size isn't difficult, but the explosive results are gratifying nonetheless.
BELOW You can tame and ride wild beasts, but there's little point beyond the initial novelty: at top speed, 2B's quite the mover as it is, and if the ground's too uneven to sprint, jumping and dashing will get you to your destination quickly



ABOVE A series of auto-chips means players less versed in action games – or those just keen to follow the story – can point 2B in the right direction and watch as she evades projectiles and punishes every whiffed attack



You can easily end up underlevelled if you're not killing every machine in your path. So while there's rarely much more to sidequests than fetching items and killing enemies, the XP gain alone makes them worth accepting

an encounter demands, or to suit your playstyle. This comes via a broad range of plug-in chips: some convey permanent boosts and others situational benefits, but it extends as far as determining which HUD elements are visible. With limited space in which to slot them, the chip system enforces some difficult choices, and that's why your first port of call when returning to base after a sortie should be the vendor offering more internal storage over the weapon seller. If you're bad at dodging or you're facing a powerful boss, you can set up a defensive build that automatically uses healing items when your HP falls below a certain level, or prevents you from taking extra damage for a brief period after being hit, allowing you to dash out of immediate danger. A chip that pulls in nearby items is a godsend when you're hunting materials to upgrade weapons and complete sidequests; likewise, one that increases the drop rate if you're chasing something specific enemies leave behind. If you're being crowded by a swarm of high-level machines, why not equip one to top up your health with every kill? And if you want the action to play out more like *Bayonetta*, try the Overclock chip, which slows everything down for a second after a perfect dodge. It's Witch Time in all but name.

Though these skirmishes dominate, Yoko and Platinum regularly look to adjust the pace, with mixed results. You'll occasionally take to the air in flying mech suits, the action shifting styles between a vintage vertical-scroller and a twin-stick shooter, with the odd into-the-screen interlude. These are entertaining enough, but even with 2B's effortless movement, exploring the world can be a chore. The environment is split into open areas and side-scrolling corridors where movement is locked to a single plane: while this makes longer journeys more appealing visually, it does little to alleviate the boredom of backtracking. A fast-travel option (courtesy of jury-rigged vending machines) arrives just as you're getting fed up with these treks, and comes with a brilliant in-fiction excuse: 2B's consciousness is being transferred digitally to another vessel held at each destination. But it doesn't entirely solve the problem, not least as sometimes you'll find the closest stop to your objective has been put out of commission, often merely so the game can interrupt you en route with a cutscene. And though the story packs in plenty of stimulating thematic material to chew over, RPGs are often defined by their cast rather than their plot – and 2B and 9S don't always make for particularly good company. For all the gloominess and bickering, *Nier*'s cast of misfits were easy to warm to. *Automata*, albeit quite deliberately for the most part, is decidedly colder to the touch.

Still, at worst this is an on-form Platinum action game spread too thinly; from another perspective, it's an action-RPG with combat that embarrasses most of its peers. Away from the battlefield, it's Yoko's hatstand ideas that linger, from a titanic face-off between two machines the size of oil rigs, through a pair of startling post-game revelations, to a robot reading Nietzsche (and subsequently deeming him 'crazy') and a rideable moose. The biggest difference between *Automata* and its director's previous work is that those weird ideas finally have a robust mechanical shell to house them – one flecked with patches of rust, perhaps, but a fine piece of engineering all the same.

8



EXQUISITE CORPSE

When 2B dies, her body remains where she fell. Though the new shell retains the same level, you'll need to reach the old one without dying again (helpfully, its position is highlighted on the mini-map) to recover its data, including plug-ins and XP. Enable network features, meanwhile, and the ground will be littered with the empty vessels of other players, accompanied by a message assembled from a series of preset phrases. Pray for them and they'll be revived, and you can retrieve money and three randomly chosen plug-ins from those they had equipped at the time. Alternatively, you can resurrect them to temporarily fight alongside you – though in a typically mischievous Yoko twist, occasionally they'll become corrupted and start attacking you instead.

Post Script

Unpacking Automata's unusually rewarding post-game. Contains spoilers

Yoko Taro might have plenty of game-design experience, but if there's one field in which he's gained true mastery, it's in trolling his players. This is, after all, the man who chose to finish the original *Drakengard* with an exacting rhythm game that demanded you reflect incoming attacks with perfect timing – culminating in an extended flurry, followed by a single final blow just at the moment you're about to sit back and reflect upon your triumph. And your reward? A sucker punch of an ending in which the two protagonists die. Yoko subsequently repeated the trick in 2014's *Drakengard 3*, only this time the sequence lasted eight minutes rather than two-and-a-half, with a final note playing over a black screen during a dialogue exchange. In both cases, a single mistake was enough to force a restart. The original *Nier* would only show you its true ending in return for deleting your save.

You can lose all your data in *Automata*, too, but on this occasion it's not mandatory. Instead, you're asked if you'd like to help online players who are struggling. You'll be able to 'rescue' a random player at the cost of sacrificing your save data. You'll be repeatedly asked if you're sure, and should you answer in the affirmative you'll be forced to watch as each and every quest, item, weapon and plug-in is systematically deleted in front of you. By then, you'll have encountered a new enemy variant that disables your systems via infection: a warning of 'visual systems abnormal' is hardly necessary when a primary-coloured fog of thick pixels is draped over the action. You'll often find other abilities simultaneously impaired. Losing the ability to launch melee attacks is bad enough, but try avoiding trouble when your evasive manoeuvring systems are down and you can't see a thing. Elsewhere, there's a long walk to a waypoint with an infected 2B, during which her movement speed slows to a limp, with enemies often waiting until you're walking up a ramp to attack you.

Otherwise, this is a much more rewarding post-game than we've grown accustomed to seeing from Yoko, and for comparatively less effort. On a second playthrough, you'll follow 9S's journey instead: it's like a more substantial version of *Resident Evil 4*'s Separate Ways, though rather than simply filling in the gaps when the two were apart, you'll also replay much of the main story from this new perspective. This is interspersed with a handful of brief, sepia-toned vignettes focusing on the machines' adoption of human traits.

There's a further appreciable difference in the form of a hacking system fleetingly introduced during the initial playthrough. Holding Triangle grants you access to enemies once you've completed a simple, top-down, twin-stick shooter with a rudimentary geometric art style. Do this mid-battle and they'll explode, dealing damage to any nearby machines. Successfully hacking a machine that hasn't spotted you gives you more options: you can subjugate them to fight alongside you, control them directly – using attacks particular to that unit – or detonate them. In truth, hacking is a shade overpowered during the biggest encounters, dealing the kind of damage that would normally require long periods of concentrated attacks. Yet for the tougher enemies it's more challenging, as you manoeuvre through tight spaces with just three hits enough to see you kicked out of the system, and with a damage penalty to boot. There's also an element of risk in remaining close enough to your target for long enough for the hack attempt to register. Inevitably, there are fresh plug-ins to choose from, which add further tactical options to encounters. Hijack Boost raises the level of machines you've successfully hacked, so they're more effective in taking down their former allies, while Stun passes an electrical charge through a target, which then emits a blast that can leave any local machines temporarily incapacitated.

> This is a much more rewarding post-game than we've grown accustomed to seeing from Yoko, and for less effort



A subsequent playthrough introduces a third playable character, A2, another android who takes the reins from 2B and boasts a similar fighting style. But rather than retreading old ground, this is a brand new story that follows on from the main narrative, as control shifts between 9S and A2 as they attempt to unlock and then negotiate a giant tower created by the machines. It's worth it just for a thrilling sequence that masterfully cross-cuts between the two protagonists as they fight a pair of bosses in the air and on the ground respectively.

The rewards, too, are generous. Reach ending C and you can access a chapter select that tells you how many side missions you have yet to finish with each character, while letting you tick off the remaining items on your shopping list of weapons without having to play the whole thing again. But, unlike Yoko's previous games, you don't need every weapon to see the fourth and fifth main endings, as both are determined by choices made in the final chapter, which can be replayed quickly from the menu. All that remain for true completists are a few secret bosses and the rest of the joke endings, even if some are difficult to prompt without prior knowledge.

Finally, there's a Debug mode, which lets you set up fight rooms in which to test your combat abilities – pick an enemy or 12, and you can select their weapon, their level, and even the direction they're facing. It's a potentially endless showcase for a great combat system, and a prize that's worth the effort. The unsparing callousness of the story proves Yoko hasn't softened much – the difference this time is he's reserved his cruellest tricks for his cast, rather than his players. ■

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Wildlands

Developer/ publisher Ubisoft (Paris)
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

Armed with silenced weapons and a take-it-or-leave-it approach to international law, four US special forces operatives are deposited in Bolivia with the goal of destabilising the Mexican drug cartel that has inexplicably taken over the country. Designed for co-op, *Wildlands* attempts to marry *Just Cause*'s freeform open world to *Clancy*-style tactical action, and *GTA*'s anarchic irreverence to *Clancy*-style militarism. It's not a particularly happy partnership. Despite the *Clancy* name, *Wildlands* merrily adopts the trappings of a Ubisoft lifestyle game; your operative can be decked out with an array of fashionable hats, beards, ghillie suits and gun paint-jobs, and its story of CIA incursion is given the Instagram treatment, an ochre glow infusing a spectacularly lethal gap-year adventure.

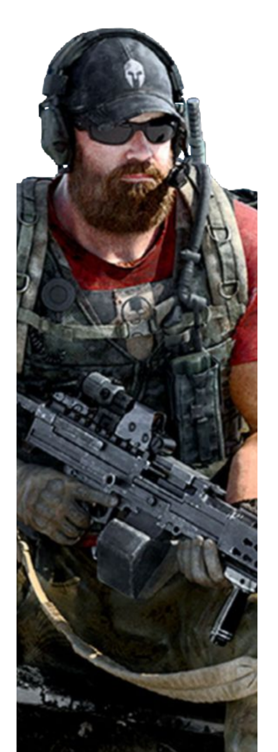
In traditional Ubisoft style, each map icon represents a templated, infinitely recurring pocket of videogame. These are spread across vast outdoor zones, which are themselves part of a truly colossal world: 30 square kilometres of South American terrain, from temperate grasslands to jungle to desert to salt flats and mountains. *Wildlands*' Bolivia is extraordinarily large and photogenic. Detail suffers up close, but it achieves moments of genuine beauty and gravitas from the air – or from the back of a speeding motorbike.

The issue is that all this space is used to house such a narrow and repetitive set of activities. Missions range from interrogating VIPs to infiltrating certain buildings, halting convoys or destroying particular equipment. Each ultimately leads to an encounter with a key member of the cartel, and each one you dispose of moves you a step closer to El Sueño, the philosophising mobster at the centre of the web. Once you've cleared out a couple of zones you may as well have cleared out all of them, and yet you'll have dozens still to go.

Wildlands' size might be an asset if its fundamentals were stronger. Gunplay is fine, for the most part, although exaggerated bullet drop even at the short distances covered by most of *Wildlands*' encounters feels like an attempt at realism that ends up pushing the game in the opposite direction. Vehicles are a bigger problem: handling is stiff for both cars and aircraft, although the latter suffer more, and vehicular physics – particularly if you go off-road – are all over the place.

Worse is the AI, which is simply too inconsistent to support the kind of shadowy tactical play with which *Ghost Recon* has always been associated. A series of alert states reflect your success at remaining hidden, but the implementation of this system into an open world creates endless problems. In one example, a raid on a heavily guarded hilltop compound goes south quickly. Guards leap and slide down the hillside and onto the road we entered along, and as we gun them down our alert state rises. Yet after they die – and despite the fact that we are still charging headlong towards the main gate of the base – the alert state goes back down again. Somebody barks: "We've lost them!" There are very few guards left in the base, so the game treats us as if we've fled the combat area. Had we not inadvertently broken the 'combo' of *Wildlands*' strange logic, waves of reinforcements would have come charging in: as it is, we claim our prize and leave in full view of the remaining guards, who gamely raise the threat level to 'suspicious' on sight of us despite the fact that a majority of their companions have just been gunned down, yards away.

Tooling around from mission to mission is passably enjoyable, but it's also fundamentally repetitive



In singleplayer, the impression of stealth is assisted by the Sync Shot, which allows you to coordinate the simultaneous takedown of multiple guards. Yet this too is an act of smoke and mirrors, with the logic governing your AI-controlled squadmates massaged to the point of shapelessness. Your crew are invisible to the enemy even while standing right in front of them, regularly teleport into position, and will happily line up impossible shots. The first time you extract them from a mission gone wrong in a stolen vehicle feels dramatic: as soon as you realise that you don't need to bother because they'll miraculously appear inside any vehicle you're in after a while, *Wildlands*' credibility takes another hit.

Their absence from multiplayer makes co-op play much harder, and better than playing *Wildlands* alone, but it's still not enough to make an underwhelming game good. Tooling around from mission to mission is passably enjoyable, but it's also fundamentally repetitive and the thrill of success is quickly exhausted. Instafail stealth sections, and missions with critical VIPs and vehicles, are a poor fit, too, dampening enthusiasm with regular game-over screens. And this is in the context of co-op with friends: despite *Wildlands*' eagerness for you to head online, public matchmaking is a crapshoot. You might be lucky and get to tag along with a goal-orientated squad of strangers, but are equally likely to find everybody AFK in their helicopters or merrily grenading each other in a town centre.

Wildlands succeeds only where success is a matter of spreading a big enough budget over a large enough area. It is vast, its landscapes are gorgeous, its weapon-customisation system is extensive, and it provides an endless list of things to do. Yet in the areas money can't buy, it stumbles; its driving model, AI, and repetitive mission structure all cry out for more elegant design, and combine to leave *Wildlands* in the strange position of looking expensive but feeling cheap. Its blithely misjudged tone and directionless structure suggests design on autopilot, and empty bigness is no longer enough to carry an open-world game on its own. The game's premise may come straight from Trump's paranoid playbook, but its hollow extravagance is arguably the more damaging point of comparison. **4**

RIGHT *Wildlands*' often detailed environments show the benefits of a big budget, but you don't interact with them in a meaningful way. MAIN Fights escalate quickly, and stealth is difficult to sustain – particularly in co-op, where one mistake by one player is all that's needed to trigger a gunfight. BOTTOM Scoping out bases with drones and binoculars allows you to tag enemies, and red areas on the minimap indicate the presence of enemies you haven't tagged. Unless you disable the UI, surprises will be rather on the scarce side









ABOVE Motorbikes are the highlight of *Wildlands*' vehicle pool, able to freely traverse its mountainous environments in a way that cars and trucks can't. Aircraft are faster, but take you out of the world



Forward-firing rockets and cannons are extraordinarily hard to aim, to the point of being useless. They look good, at least

Post Script

The war on irony reaches South America

Wildlands' setting does it no favours. *Just Cause*, *Grand Theft Auto* and *Far Cry* are bigger influences, here, than previous *Ghost Recon* games – or, more broadly, than the *Clancy* universe. Yet each of the game's spiritual forebears was careful to position its tale of open-world destruction in an explicitly fictional context. *Just Cause*'s banana republics are based on real places, but aren't presented as being authentic. *Wildlands*, by contrast, attempts both geopolitical authenticity and giddy open-world impunity. It's a singularly poor decision.

Its vast territory purports to be Bolivia, and Bolivia is purportedly overrun by a cartel called the Santa Blanca. In traditional *Clancy* style, this information is introduced via high-tech military briefings rapidly intercut with real documentary footage. Bolivia, we are told, has fallen to the cartels to the extent that its government has decided to work around them, rather than against them. Indeed, the local security forces represent a powerful enemy faction in their own right, a *GTA*-style opposing faction that it's OK to gun down because they're corrupt.

Detailed infographics show South American corruption driving violence north, through Mexico, into the US: and the USA's only logical recourse is to deploy the Ghosts into Bolivia to destroy Santa Blanca with the help of local resistance fighters. Perhaps when *Wildlands* began development, its story of US intervention in crime-ridden South America seemed suitably abstract, like Russia getting an EMP for the umpteenth time. Its timing now, however, is deeply unfortunate, and so *Wildlands*, wittingly or not, promotes a line of thinking on South America aligned with the worst of modern North American paranoia – and the action it advocates aligns with the direst promises of the current US executive.

Beyond this accident of history, however, *Wildlands* has real tonal problems. As a co-op experience, an online service and a destructive sandbox, it suits it to borrow some of *GTA*'s lightheartedness. Slapstick chaos is a fact of life in this kind of game, and its vision of a Bolivia redeemed by attractive motocross-racing, helicopter-crashing, truck-flipping special forces ops might even work as satire if it didn't take itself so seriously.

This would require the Ghosts themselves to be the butt of the joke, however – a joke that Team America already told, more effectively, 13 years ago – and *Wildlands* isn't willing to go that far. Instead, the attempt is made to present you and your squadmates as darkly funny. Party banter (which plays, bizarrely, even if you're online and the AI squadmates aren't present) includes back-slapping digressions on topics like preferred torture methods, funny things about corpses, and wistfully remembered war crimes.

It's here that the influence of *GTA* is most keenly felt, particularly the nasty edge that crept into the Housers' writing in *GTAV*. This is apparent also through Bolivia's radio station, which veers wildly from serious exposition to self-consciously wacky digressions on subjects such as the best time of day for cocaine, and why Bolivian women should be proud of their moustaches.

If it sounds bizarre, it is. *Wildlands'* designers have clearly perceived that a co-op open-world game is necessarily going to feel a little lighter than typical *Clancy* fare, but their spectacularly tone-deaf response is so lacking in circumspection that it might be the most remarkable thing about this ordinary game. The expense lavished on each video briefing is extraordinary given how badly they clash with the tone of the rest of the experience.

To be fair to *Wildlands*, it's far from the first game to turn atrocity into entertainment. Yet it is so openly callous about its competing urges that it unintentionally shines a light on the issue. Its tastelessness should amount to a form of public service: Ubisoft went there, so now no other studio needs to. ■


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Persona 5

Developer Atlus
Publisher Deep Silver
Format PS4
Release April 7

And we thought western games were made to templates. *Persona 5* marches to the beat of a practically identical drum as *Persona 4*, which in turn was structurally indistinguishable from *Persona 3*. This, in fairness, is a natural consequence of setting a game across the span of the academic year; each new instalment cannot help but hit the same beats – the fear of being the new kid, the dread of being called on in class, the panic of exams, the ecstatic release of holidays and festivals – as the game that came before it. If it's intended as commentary on the stoic rhythm society imposes on the young, then fair enough, but it also removes much of the game's ability to surprise you.

Still, within that framework are plenty of variations on the *Persona* theme, though some will simply evoke a different twinge of déjà vu. If you've played bizarre J-pop crossover *Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE* you'll not be surprised to learn that *Persona 5* continues that game's theme of experimentation with dungeon design; gone are *Persona 4*'s drab endless corridors, replaced with multi-layered puzzle dungeons (styled as 'palaces'), each built around a different central mechanic. None of it is particularly taxing – as before, simply covering all available ground on each floor will lead you to the solution – but there is, at least, more to think about than simply finding the staircase to the next area.

The story casts the central group as the Phantom Thieves and, as that name implies, there's a heavy emphasis on stealth. A new cover system is an essential tool; enemies patrol set paths, and ambushing them from out of sight lets your party draw first blood in the turn-based battle that follows. If you're spotted, the enemy force goes first, and the palace's security level raises, increasing the number of guards on patrol. The result is a slower pace to dungeon crawling than we've come to expect from the series; there's a dash button, but you'll rarely feel like using it.

As in previous instalments, the key to a battle is identifying an enemy's elemental weakness, since hitting them where it most hurts knocks them to the floor, letting you attack again. Put the entire enemy party down, and you can unleash an All-Out Attack, where your group piles on to deal heavy damage. It's a smart way of subverting the normal rhythm of turn-based combat, and means many battles against the rank and file are over before they can even take a turn. Yet here, there's a twist; put an entire group on the floor and, instead of simply smashing them to pieces, you can enter a negotiation. Through a series of multiple-choice dialogue exchanges, you can extort cash or an item, or recruit a foe to join your cause as a persona, giving the main character more abilities in battle. There's a tradeoff, of course: you'll get less XP for not killing them, and if you fail to impress in the conversation, you may get nothing at all.

Put an entire group on the floor and, instead of simply smashing them to pieces, you can enter a negotiation



Yet it's a fine twist on the formula that fits with the tone of the game. You are, after all, a band of thieves, infiltrating the distorted mind palaces of a series of ne'er-do-wells, defeating their final form and stealing a treasure that, in the real world, causes them to have a change of heart and confess their sins. Whereas *Persona 4* was about a group of kids defeating their personal demons, becoming stronger and kinder, *Persona 5* focuses on the rebel spirit. Every member of your steadily expanding party struggles with their otherness, with the way they don't fit in. A track star who's been cast out by his teammates; a half-Japanese girl with blonde hair; a school president who's closer to the staff than she is her classmates. It's an effective theme for a game about high-school kids, to whom conformity is everything. A creeping subtext about the importance of a stable family life – most of the group have lost at least one parent, be that to death, divorce or the demands of international business – is less successful, making a stuffily old-fashioned point about the nuclear family that seems at odds with the game's attempt to celebrate, rather than demean, those who stand out from the crowd. Still, it brings the group together and, as is tradition, as the party grows in number, so its members grow in self-confidence and strength.

That strength helps in combat, of course, but for all the changes on the field of battle, *Persona 5*, like its predecessors, shines in its quieter moments. Away from the metaverse, back in the real world the obstacles of real teenage life must also be navigated. As ever, your every activity raises one stat or another. Hanging out with a friend strengthens the bond between you, letting you create more powerful personas. Studying raises your Knowledge stat, the bonus doubled if it's raining outside, since it helps you focus on your work. Do so in a diner, and you'll raise other stats depending on what you order: choose coffee and your Guts will rise, in recognition of the chutzpah it takes to sit in a booth by yourself and drink free refills all evening. Everything has value, and there's a wonderful freedom to the handful of days it takes for a target to change their ways after you clear out a dungeon – when, with no pressure, you're free to do as you please, hanging out with friends across a steadily expanding map of Tokyo.

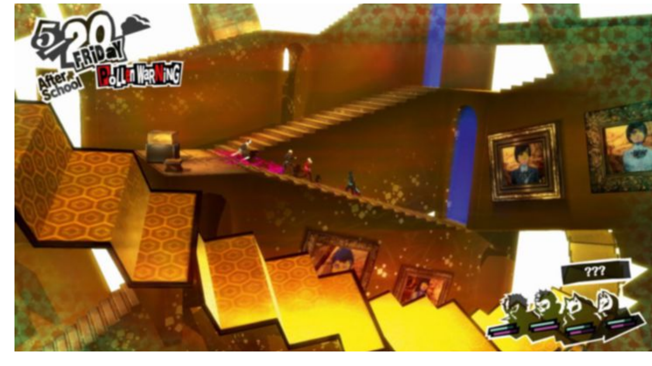
The focus on the rebellious, non-conformist side of youth has its drawbacks, but means *Persona 5* is something to which its predecessors could never lay claim. It is, simply put, cool. Everything, from the intro movie's disco house to the battle-mode cutaways and even the basic UI, is achingly, confidently stylish. Criminally, the DualShock 4's Share button functionality is blocked for the duration, but this is one of few true blemishes on a game that, while at times a bit too familiar, never comes close to breeding contempt.

8





ABOVE Spending your downtime with companions strengthens the bond between you, but the benefits extend beyond more powerful Personas. You'll unlock new skills in battle, and maybe even get yourself a girlfriend





MAIN Ryuji is your first companion, and early on is the only member of your party with electrical powers. **ABOVE** Palaces are a significant step up from Persona 4's dungeons. Here, the party is tackling an evil artist, whose palace involves some devious, painting-themed puzzles. **LEFT** The early fights in a palace rather lack for pace, since you don't yet know each enemy type's weakness. Once the action gets into gear, though, it's delightful.

For Honor

For Honor doesn't feel like a Ubisoft game. It doesn't try to do everything; it doesn't pack an open world with collectibles; it isn't trying to be for everybody. Ubisoft's free-roaming medieval combat simulator has the depth of a fighting game, building a complex system of feints, parries, stance switches and grabs out of a few simple building blocks.

In one-on-one duels, the purest expression of *For Honor*, play follows a set pattern. First, you assess your opponent, since each of the game's 12 characters approaches combat differently. The naginata-wielding samurai Nobushi uses kicks and backsteps to keep her distance while needling you from long range. The axe-bearing viking Berserker thrives in close, where her fast, multidirectional attacks are hardest to reliably guard against. The lumbering knight Lawbringer, meanwhile, wields a poleaxe, a long-range threat that can be chained into potent throws at close range, but his slow swings make him vulnerable to parries.

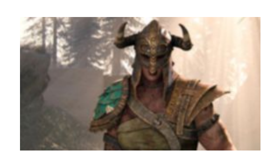
After your opponent comes the battlefield itself. A duelling field may simply be a square courtyard enclosed on all sides, but it might equally be a bell tower with a sheer drop on one side, or a rope bridge, or the bank of a river of lava. This is vital. Enclosed environments restrict movement and prohibit swinging strikes, while environmental hazards place importance on guard-break counters. Fail to repel a guard break and you open yourself up to a throw, at which point you're at the mercy of your opponent – and specifically, their sense of honour. Will they fight to the death, or simply throw you to yours?

After these considerations comes the drama of the combat system itself. Each character has access to three directional stances (left, right, and up) as well as light and heavy attacks, a guard break, an area-clearing zone attack, and parries that are achieved by launching a heavy attack into an incoming blow during a narrow window of time. Yet in each case these simple elements combine in different ways: their timing windows, their reach, the moves they combo with. Understanding the game at this level is the reward and the requirement of high-level play, where *For Honor* becomes a dance of feints and footwork with no element of luck. Losses are crushing, but the promise of a win will keep the competitive player running back for more.

A duel is the simplest expression of *For Honor*, but this same logic extends to two-on-two brawls, where each player starts facing a member of the opposing team. Polite (but unenforced) convention dictates that you let one of these duels finish before piling in, effectively granting each player a 'second' should they fail. The four-on-four Elimination mode is looser, with strategy revolving around how each team approaches those initial pairings. If you can kill your opposite number quickly, you are free to run off and help somebody else – but you can run away immediately, if you like, and attempt to overpower a different opponent before your jilted sparring partner catches up.

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Montreal)
Format PC (tested), PS4, Xbox One
Release Out now

Fail to repel a guard break and you open yourself up to a throw, at which point you're at the mercy of your opponent



EQUAL FIGHTS
For Honor's art direction sets the game apart from the fighting games that might otherwise be its peers. It's notable not only for its Thrones-style grit, but also for the unspoken but pervasive respect for diversity expressed through its character designs. The majority of characters have options for gender and ethnicity, including all three protagonists of the story mode. *For Honor*'s women are athletic and, with the exception of the vikings, fully armoured. However, even in the case of the Norse, they're not overtly sexualised. The primary antagonist of singleplayer, Apollyon, is a woman and if you opt for a female protagonist each time that you are given the choice, *For Honor* even passes the Bechdel test.

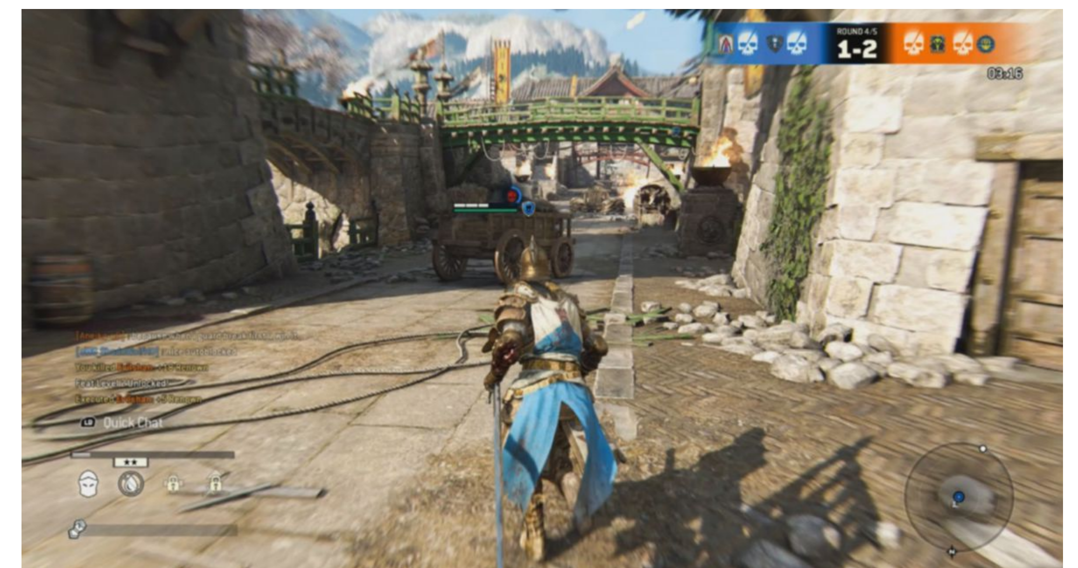
Power-ups provide an incentive to control certain areas of the map, while in these team modes how you defeat somebody matters more than it does in a duel. Finishing off an opponent's healthbar with a heavy strike allows you to perform an execution, the benefits of which extend far beyond the drama of the kill itself. Executed players can't be revived by their team-mates; this creates a network of soft and hard win conditions within an already complex fighting system, within a strategically broad team-action game.

The two other modes, Dominion and Skirmish, are looser still: the former revolves around capture points and the latter is essentially team deathmatch. You can respawn after death, and both dial down the importance of one-on-one fighting nous in favour of strategic play and fighting as a group. *For Honor* doesn't show its best side in this context, but it also provides a much less punishing entry point for new players. The downside is Skirmish shares a matchmaking queue with Elimination while being a very different, arguably weaker mode.

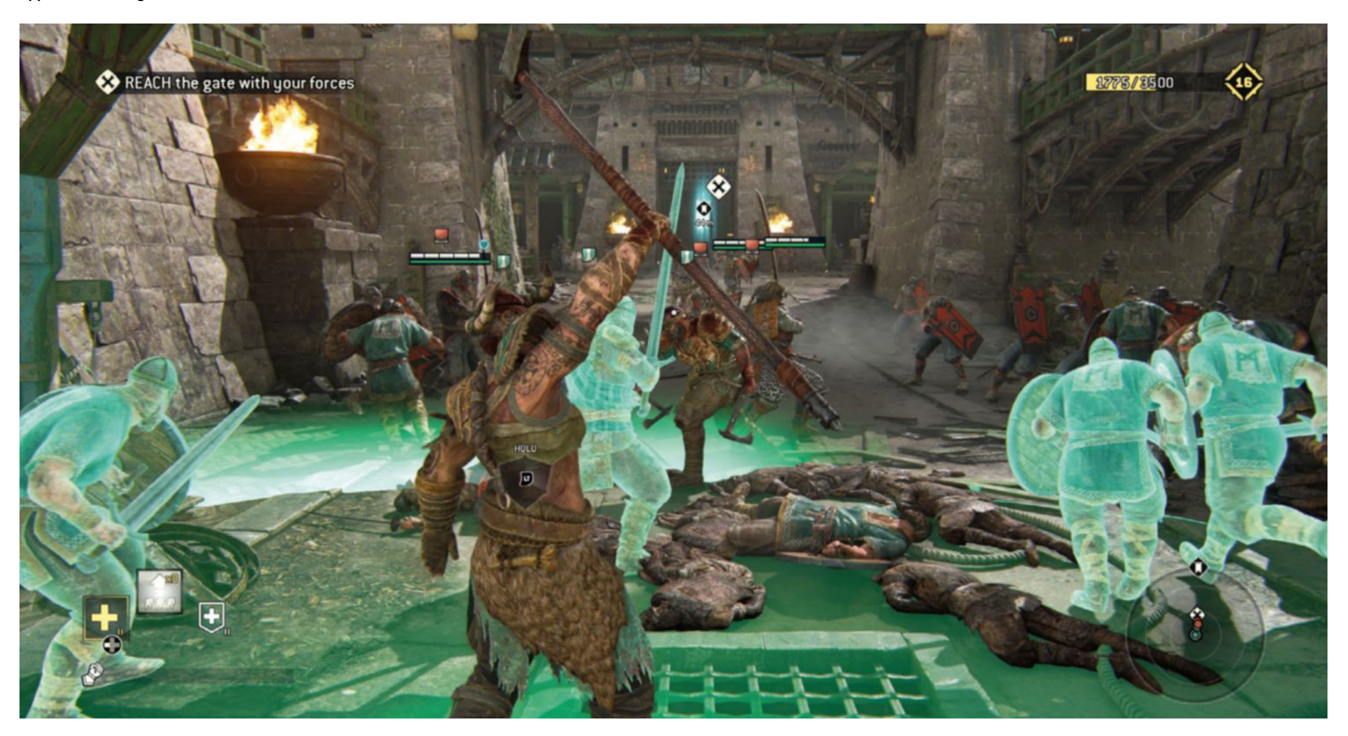
For Honor's singleplayer campaign threads a course through the knight, viking and samurai factions to tell the story of a decade-spanning war. Seen as the story mode in a fighting game, its scope is decent enough, but as a standalone action game, it's a little thin. There's not much to do besides fight, and the repetition is only redeemed by the strength of the combat system. At its best, it offers moments of real spectacle. At its worst, it has you hunting the same few enemies over used and re-used singleplayer versions of multiplayer maps. Over the course of the campaign you're introduced to nine out of 12 characters, however, and as such it's a welcome way to start to get to grips with *For Honor*'s complexity. Beyond that, Ubisoft Montreal provides extensive custom-match options and commendably effective AI, both of which help when you begin to take the game more seriously and want to drill specific techniques.

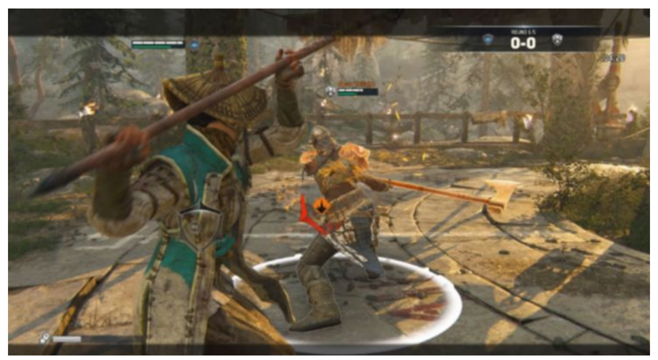
For Honor's weaknesses are chiefly in its UI and the systems that surround the core game. In-game and out, the interface is far busier than it needs to be, though you'll learn to focus on the key elements. A metagame that tracks points earned by players aligned to each faction on a war map is distracting, and unnecessary: without ranked play, the notion of a 'season' of multiplayer is rather empty. Character customisation options are welcome, but stat-altering gear doesn't contribute much and ties into a microtransaction system that comes off as grasping given the cost of a full-price game and a season pass. It's feature-creep, in short, bloat orbiting an excellent core. In that regard, at least, *For Honor* is a Ubisoft game.

8



RIGHT The Warden is *For Honor*'s all-rounder, but learning to make the most of her broad skillset takes a substantial amount of time.
MAIN The singleplayer campaign introduces minions and capture zones that carry over into the multiplayer mode. In addition to combat, it'll also teach you how to deploy special powers effectively.
BOTTOM Icons orbiting your opponent warn of the direction of an incoming blow. However, the ability to feint out of a heavy strike lets you use this to mislead your opponents, baiting out a mistake







ABOVE Killing NPC soldiers is easy, but getting swamped by them makes you vulnerable and can drain your stamina. In that regard, they represent a softer environmental hazard than deadly spike hazards or lethal drops

Halo Wars 2

Oh boy, the Spartans. If one unit sums up *Halo Wars 2*'s approach to realtime strategy, it's the series' revered supersoldiers. They leave enemy grunts cowering in their wake, reduce vehicles to piles of twisted metal, and are capable of withstanding barrages of missiles that would drop a tank, with little but a depleted shield to show for it. Their special, meanwhile, sees them leaping high before slamming down, devastating any units in the vicinity – unless you land on, say, a Wraith, in which case it'll be yours to command in a matter of moments. Sure, this mightn't involve much more strategic nous than a kid grabbing a Transformers toy and stomping it across a chessboard. All the same, it's a delight to witness.

Spartans apart, Creative Assembly – having taken over the series from the now-defunct Ensemble Studios – has done little to upset the tactical equilibrium of the eight-year-old original. Some minor adjustments might throw returning players (commands mapped to triggers and bumpers have been swapped) but the core of the game is relatively unchanged. Ignoring the aesthetic improvements, this feels like a straight follow-up, with little evidence of a new studio at the helm.

In terms of the controls, that's no bad thing. They mightn't match the elegance and flexibility of *Pikmin 3* when it comes to a console RTS, but they're among the most intuitive replacements for a traditional mouse-and-keyboard setup. Creative Assembly has sensibly opted to keep the original configuration pretty much intact. Tapping A lets you select individual units; holding it lets you grab a cluster. You can cycle between types within larger groups, and quickly select all local or global units, while the D-pad lets you instantly zip between your bases and the frontline; combined with the right trigger, you can also assign specific groups to the four compass points. Simply, it works.

There are two resource types this time, which can be harvested from silos on the battlefield, with the rest created at your bases. In theory, this introduces another tactical consideration – you may need more supply pads than power generators, depending on the kind of army you're looking to build – but in practice it feels largely unnecessary. For the most part, *Halo Wars 2* still feels like an action game masquerading as an RTS. Naturally, it pays to learn the rock-paper-scissors connections between units: if you're facing anti-air Reavers, it's wise to get your Hornets to hang back and protect them with a clutch of armoured Cyclops troops before unleashing death from above. But often it's more about amassing a large army, pointing it in the direction of your opponent and watching the pyrotechnics commence, weighing in occasionally with missiles and mines to debilitate enemy units or recovery pods to heal your own.

Until, suddenly, it isn't. Throughout a 12-mission campaign, you frequently get away with brute-forcing your way to success – though par times encourage efficiency, most optional objectives simply ask you to be thorough – but on occasion you'll find both units and resources are limited and you need to play with caution. Such changes of tempo are welcome in some respects: a mission where a small cabal of units is forced to dig in against waves of attackers is beautifully judged. But in terms of welcoming new players to an unfamiliar genre, it's perhaps unwise to veer so sharply between leniency and strictness. And though there's audio feedback for every action, in the heat of conflict it becomes a cacophony of competing sounds and shouts, so it may be tough for beginners to effectively parse.

Still, it's rare that losing a handful of units is fatal when you can simply throw more into the fray. Base construction is limited to defined build spots, giving you one less thing to worry about, while affording Creative Assembly more control over the pacing of the map. That in turn allows the developer to slot in some striking set-pieces: one stage, for example, requires you to attack a series of valuable targets, while the enemy sporadically calls in swarms of drones to protect them, forcing you to pull back. No matter: you're promptly given a massive EMP to take them down.

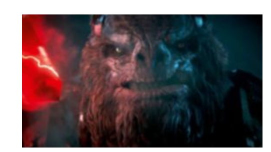
While the campaign often lets you roll up with the big guns and just outmuscle your opponent, that's much harder to do in online matches. The standard competitive game types are enjoyable if unremarkable, though they're elevated by the variety in leader powers. AI ally Isabel can introduce holographic troops as a distraction; antagonist Atriox's defensive options keep him in the game for longer, while his right-hand Brute Decimus is perfect for those who prefer to rush their rivals. The standout mode, however, is Blitz, which gives you a deck of cards with which to deploy new units as you battle over capture points. Its frantic pace, as you scurry between zones, hoping for a kind draw – though you can shuffle your hand for a small energy cost – suits the game, and while microtransactions may yet prove intrusive at a higher level, playing through the campaign alone should give you enough packs to get by. A wave-based Firefight mode is an entertaining co-op alternative, but rather overwhelming tackled alone.

It's a scrappy kind of strategy, then, but *Halo Wars 2* compensates in visual drama – the explosions when a base finally falls make it worth the effort and units you expended, while an ODST drop is similarly sensational. There's a tactile pleasure in the smaller animations, too, like Pelican dropships depositing extensions to your home base. Sacrificing a degree of nuance at the altar of spectacle is a trade-off most *Halo* fans will be happy to make. Yes, at times it feels like you're just smashing toys together and watching the carnage unfold. But what wonderful toys they are.

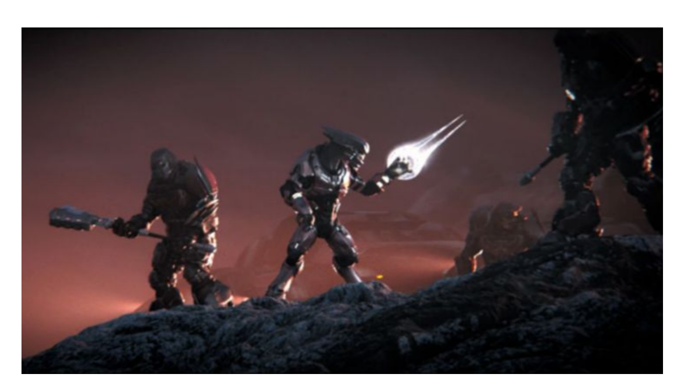
7

Developer 343 Industries, Creative Assembly
Publisher Microsoft Studios
Format PC, Xbox One (tested)
Release Out now

Creative Assembly has done little to upset the tactical equilibrium of the eight-year-old original



BRUTE A LORE
Halo Wars 2's story takes place 28 years after the original, with the crew of the UNSC having awoken from cryosleep to find a distress signal. This leads them into conflict with Atriox, leader of a splinter group of Brutes named the Banished, which has separated from the Covenant. Atriox himself is introduced in a terrific, lavish CGI sequence from Blur Studio. However, having established a new and imposing foe, the plot has him disappear for much of the game. And although the climactic encounter reaches a fitting crescendo, an abrupt ending makes this feel like another *Halo* story more concerned with setting up future entries than reaching a satisfying conclusion of its own. Still, we'd welcome Atriox's return in the inevitable *Halo 6*.





ABOVE In Blitz mode, you'll need enough energy in reserve to play a card. It's better to play as many high-value cards as you can at the start – a more powerful army should give you more time to harvest energy



TOP The campaign follows the UNSC, so if you want to play as the Banished you're limited to the various multiplayer modes. Though UNSC units tend to be individually stronger, their opponents can swamp them with sheer numbers. MAIN Jumping straight into the campaign isn't necessarily the best idea, as it doesn't quite teach you everything you need to know. Newcomers should start with the tutorials, not least since you'll earn Blitz packs for completing them. RIGHT The flamethrower-wielding Hellbringers are useful for early rushes, proving deadly against infantry and buildings, though they'll require protection from airborne units. An upgrade gives their weapons dispersion nozzles, that let them set the ground on fire



Night In The Woods

Stealing has never been quite so nerve-wracking. From pickpocketing as Corvo Attano or Ezio Auditore to smashing villagers' urns and scooping up their hidden rupees as Link, we've become masters of casual theft over the years. Yet as Mae Borowski stretches out a paw to grab a chunky belt buckle while a shop assistant shifts her gaze in the other direction, we find ourselves reflexively tensing. This is low-stakes stuff as far as crimes go, but *Night In The Woods* has convinced us that it matters. As we hurriedly exit the shop with our ill-gotten gains and breathe, along with Mae, a sigh of relief, we realise why. It's because we *care*.

That's quite the feat, since Mae isn't always the easiest protagonist to like. At the tender age of 20, she's dropped out of college and has returned to her home, the gloomy town of Possum Springs, which has evidently been in steady decline for some years. While her parents fret over finances, her former schoolmates have been forced to adjust quickly to the realities of adulthood, with three of them working in the handful of local stores that haven't been shuttered. Everyone has moved on, in other words, yet Mae hasn't done much growing up, and seems oblivious to the trials of her friends and family. As such, the dialogue options you're given are often a choice between two equally insensitive options. The first time someone calls her an asshole, you'll be quietly inclined to agree.

Still, with her self-destructive tendencies and propensity for insensitivity, Mae is the kind of flawed lead we don't see enough of. While she may sometimes be careless and unthinking, her heart's in the right place, even when her mouth isn't. The rest of the cast are realised with similar nuance. Among her friends, alligator Bea is fittingly snappy, but her irritation at Mae's immaturity belies a demonstrable affection. Meanwhile Gregg (an endearingly irresponsible fox) and Angus (a thoughtful, compassionate bear) are two seeming opposites whose relationship nevertheless feels sweet and sincere. The quality of the writing is such that you'll seek out incidental dialogue and interactions. Reaching past a flyer ('Possum Springs? More like Awesome Springs') Mae rolls her eyes at the presence of a ball of yarn, before reacting with delight as she bats it about. "Oh, man," she says. "It bounces."

An early discovery of a severed arm sets up a dark mystery plot that takes its sweet time to come to the boil. For almost all of its first half, and much of its second, *Night In The Woods* is less concerned with story than character. There's more than a dash of Richard Linklater's loose, unhurried style and generous humanism here, while the humour carries the same warmth and occasional bite you'd expect from Mike Judge. Somehow the dialogue, with its off-the-cuff remarks and idiosyncratic phrases, feels almost improvisational – a terrific recurring gag where Gregg and Mae imagine increasingly grisly fates for one another rings wonderfully true. As, too, do the messenger chats on her laptop, with their occasional spelling mistakes and pregnant pauses.

Developer Infinite Fall
Publisher Finji
Format PC (tested), PS4
Release Out now

The strength of the writing is such that you'll barely notice that you're spending most of your time walking (and jumping; every third leap gets a *Mario*-aping height boost) around Possum Springs looking for people to talk to. Besides, developer Infinite Fall regularly tries to disrupt the routine with various asides, like the aforementioned shoplifting sequence and a cathartic striplight-smashing episode in a parking lot at sunset. Mae will jot down the day's activities in her journal, the words and doodles becoming a personal document shaped by the decisions you make and your performance in the minigames. Three increasingly challenging rhythm-action interludes see Mae pick up her old bass guitar to jam with her friends; after we struggle to adjust to a fast-paced number, she diarises her failure thus: "RIP my bass playing".

Such moments of levity are the perfect counterpoint to an undercurrent of darkness that grows steadily more pervasive as the story moves into its third and fourth chapters. Just as Mae begins to settle into a routine, her dreams grow stranger and more unsettling. These take the form of simple platforming sections, which at first represent another change of rhythm and style, but soon begin to outstay their welcome: the environments are large and sparse, with awkward layouts that enforce backtracking. More damningly, you'll come to realise there's no real reason for their existence. Until then we were happy to fall in with the meandering pace. It really didn't need slowing down any further.

If these nightmares are a forgivable misstep, the final chapter's deluge of plot developments and an ill-advised dip into cosmic horror are more damaging. The relatable human drama is hastily shunted aside for something harder to pin down; the thematic strands never come close to knitting together, and one potentially horrifying reveal is handled so clumsily it left us spluttering. And if earlier exchanges were on the brink of overindulgence, there are moments here in dire need of an editor's knife.

An affecting epilogue salvages plenty from the wreckage. Its message, delivered with humour and feeling, is a heartfelt missive to the dejected and disaffected; a reminder that when life feels more darkness than light, there's always a good reason to keep plodding on. *Night In The Woods* might test your resolve in similar fashion, but it's a testament to the characters that you surely will. Perhaps that's Infinite Fall's ultimate triumph: with a group of 2D animals it's built a cast that's more rounded and identifiably human than any mo-capped blockbuster.

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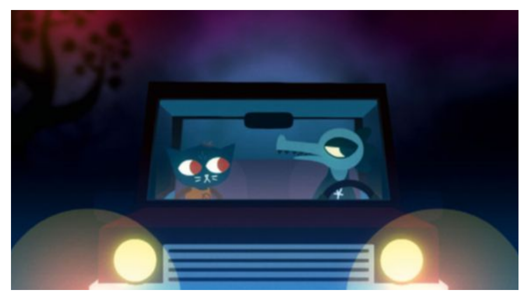
Such moments of levity are the perfect counterpoint to an undercurrent of darkness that grows steadily more pervasive

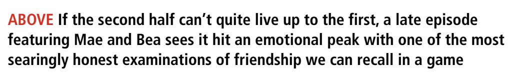


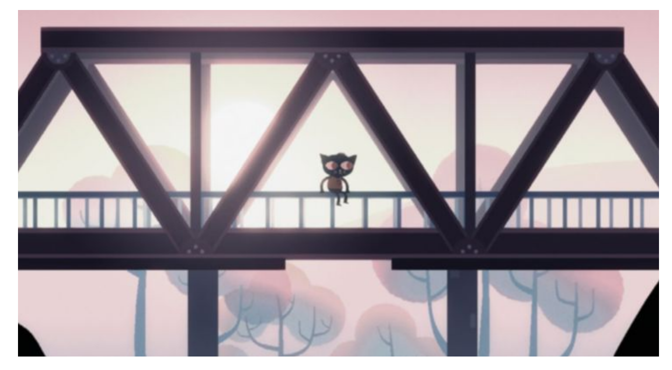
CAT AND MOUSE
At the beginning of the game, Mae's laptop is swamped with adware, rendering it useless. Angus gives her a software fix on a USB stick. It also contains a game, a top-down, retro-style dungeon crawler that Mae can play when she's not checking for messages from Bea or Gregg. It's a simple confection, but surprisingly absorbing and a decent challenge, too. You'll face a variety of enemy archetypes with an animalistic twist, from skeletal cats to beaked wizards, with nothing more than a sword and a dash move to dodge incoming attacks. You'll need to ensure your health is topped up before facing the bosses: the first is easily polished off, but the second is a brute, capable of demolishing much of your life gauge with a single whack.

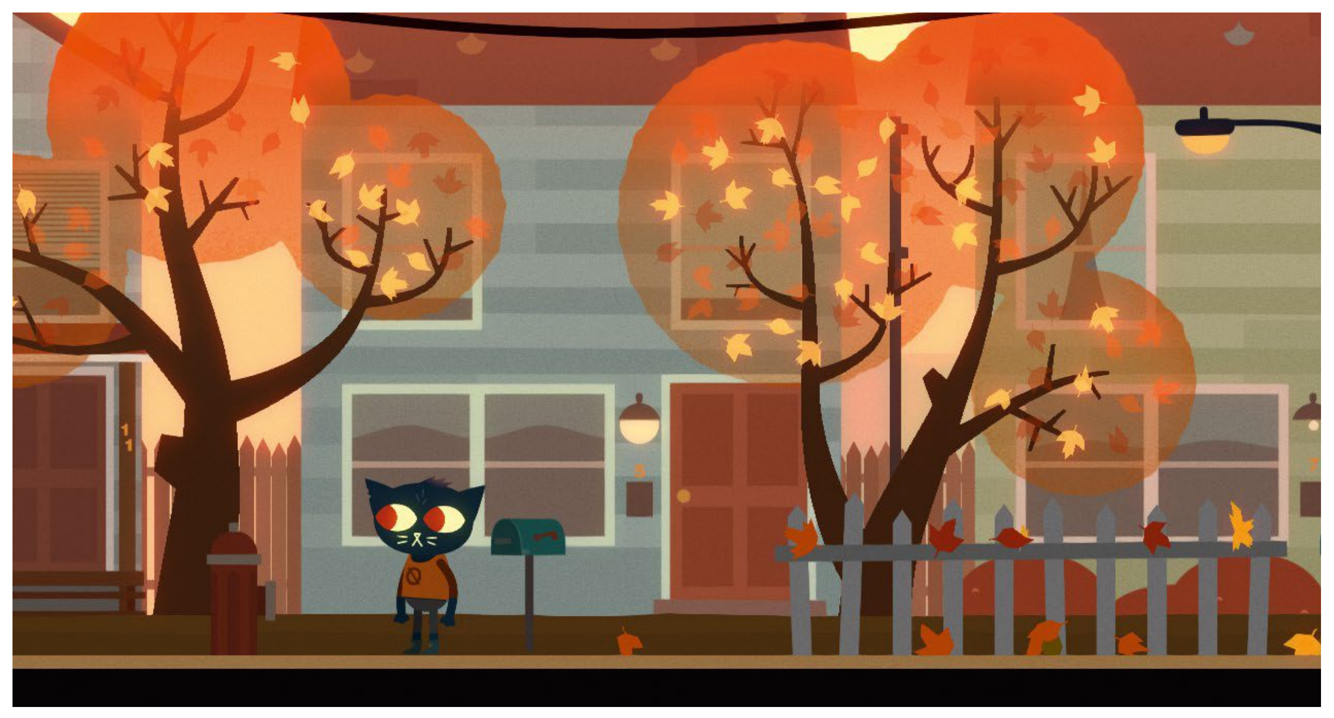


LEFT Among the many thoughtful details, this outdoor party scene is notable for a lovely moment where the background music cuts out and you note that the guitarist has stopped playing to tune up.
BELOW There are plenty of optional interactions to discover, from conversations with characters who require a bit of careful platforming to reach, to areas where you're simply invited to take a load off.
MAIN Myriad environmental animations, such as fluttering autumnal leaves, breathe life into a dying town. The palette shifts to more muted tones when the weather takes a turn for the worse




ABOVE If the second half can't quite live up to the first, a late episode featuring Mae and Bea sees it hit an emotional peak with one of the most searingly honest examinations of friendship we can recall in a game



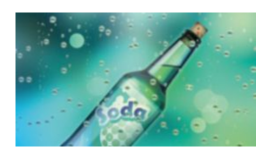


1-2 Switch

With *Breath Of The Wild* comfortably fulfilling its straightforward remit to be an unmissably brilliant Nintendo game, *1-2-Switch* has been assigned the less glamorous – but no less important – job of selling its host console's feature set. In that role, of demonstrating the possibilities of the hardware, it's an undoubted success. But it feels like an ideal pack-in game that's been somewhat overvalued by its publisher, and it's not hard to imagine what might have happened had the similarly slight *Wii Sports* also been sold solus at an inflated price tag.

Its suite of 28 two-player minigames may seem generous, but perhaps half of those will be quickly left out of the rotation when friends and family members next come over. Among the highlights are Safe Cracker, a fascinating showcase for the Joy-Cons' HD Rumble feature in which you rotate your wrist to turn a dial until you feel a more pronounced click. Telephone manages to turn the simple act of answering a call into a strangely tense competitive challenge. At the more physically demanding end of the scale is Wizard, where the Joy-Cons become thrusting wands in a back-and-forth magical battle sure to have kids of all ages picturing themselves as Harry Potter facing Voldemort.

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD)
Format Switch
Release Out now

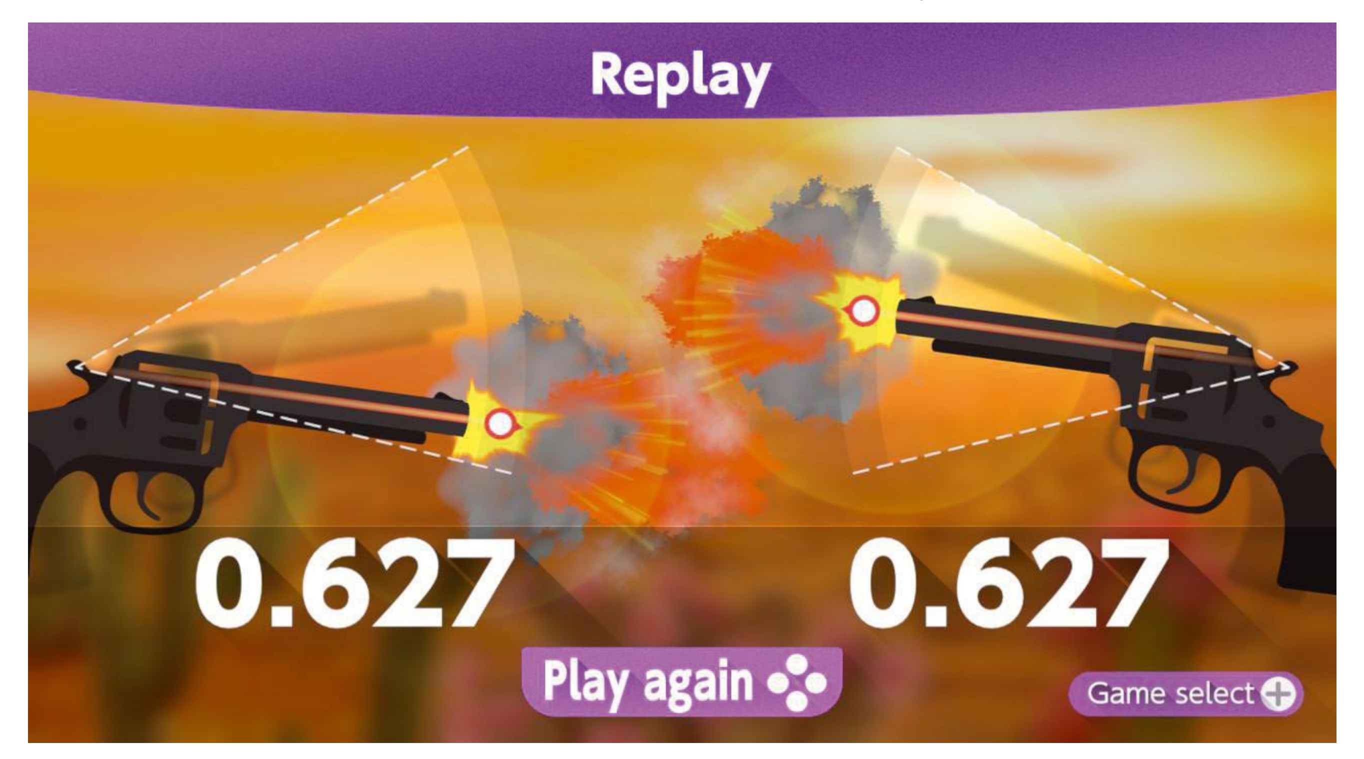


ONE OFF THE WRIST STRAP
This might well be the muckiest Nintendo game to date, from the suggestive techniques used in Milk to Soda Spray's onanistic shaking motion and messy climax. We're sure this is deliberate: what's displayed on the screen keeps Nintendo's family-friendly reputation intact, but the gestures tell another story. Such outrageous filth is more likely to appeal to a broader audience than games like Gorilla, in which players rhythmically beat their chests to woo a potential mate. Bizarre.

It rarely gets much more complex than that, though immediacy is rather the point. The short videos that introduce each minigame are bland and benign, like much of the presentation. But then the screen isn't the focus; instead, you're told to look at one another. The real game takes place within the room, then, with ample opportunity to confound, distract or otherwise trick your opponent. You might swing enthusiastically in Table Tennis as if smashing the ball, while squeezing the shoulder button that produces a lob, forcing a hasty return into the net. Or during the self-explanatory Quick Draw, you could yell 'fire!' so your rival jumps the gun. In that light, variant Fake Draw, during which a voice shouts similar words to tempt you into a premature shot, feels somewhat redundant.

Energetic if simplistic, shallow yet enormously replayable, it's the kind of game you'll forget about for months, rediscover during a party, and within ten minutes everyone will be shouting, laughing and clamouring to join in. It's an expensive welcome mat of a game, sporadically rather than consistently inspired. There will, no doubt, be more expansive and alluring Switch games that develop these concepts into something more substantial. For now, however, there's something strangely appealing about a game that so exuberantly celebrates the uniqueness of this fascinating new Nintendo hardware.

6



What are the chances? Probably higher than you'd think. We've spoken to several other people who've also experienced a dead heat in Quick Draw, which suggests there's some behind-the-scenes fudging going on

Snipperclips: Cut It Out, Together!

Hey, the cog might be wonky, but it's *ours*. One of the many joys of *Snipperclips* is the strange sense of attachment – and pride, for that matter – you'll feel towards the messy shapes you make when you bring its two protagonists together and use one to shear pieces from the other. That's the hook for this unassuming co-op puzzle game (previously known as *Friendshapes*) from British developer SFB Games. There are no further embellishments to this central idea, but *Snipperclips* doesn't need them: its diverse objectives are testament to its considerable flexibility. It gives you as much room to blunder your way to success as to carefully orchestrate an efficient solution. If these geometric heroes end up looking as if a toddler has been hacking away at them with safety scissors, it matters little as long as they get the job done.

It's designed primarily for two players, with each guiding an arch-shaped character on legs. The ability to fully rotate their bodies, stretch their legs or flatten flush against the floor means you're able to prune the other into pretty much any shape by tapping A where they overlap. After a few stages, it looks like simple wedges, hooks and scoops are all you'll need to get through most of the game. But there's much more to *Snipperclips* than arranging the two characters to fit within a dotted outline, or ferrying objects to a goal. You might be asked to change the back tyre on a racing car by guiding it across an angular rail, lift the bud of an awkwardly rubbery plant to catch some rays, or simultaneously hold down a series of switches to activate a background display of the solar system.

You can play alone, swapping between the characters as you manoeuvre them into position, but you'll rarely be able to fudge a solution as you can in co-op. Levels that demand meticulous care transform into slapstick farce when another player is involved. You'll regularly get into hilarious muddles, yelling instructions at one another, using your partner as a ramp or a springboard, or giddily juggling precious cargo between yourselves as you stumble toward its intended destination.

A series of party modes (see 'Geometry wars') explains the decision to offer a bundle option with an extra set of Joy-Cons. But without them it's a fine demonstration of Switch's out-of-the-box multiplayer capabilities – and a decent showcase for the fidelity of its controllers' rumble feature, too. It may not look much like a firstparty game, but as you collapse into helpless giggling for the umpteenth time – it *was* pretty wonky – you'll understand why Nintendo has clasped this inventive, malleable and rambunctiously entertaining British puzzler to its bosom.

8

Developer SFB Games
Publisher Nintendo
Format Switch
Release Out now



GEOMETRY WARS

Two additional modes support up to four players, though more participants doesn't necessarily increase the entertainment value. Co-op stages soon descend into absurdity – despite some comic highlights, these tend to pall rather quickly. Three competitive options are more worthwhile: the basketball and air hockey variants might be scrappy, but one quick game soon becomes five. And frantic deathmatches in Dojo mode – where you snip your rivals to nothing – are shallow, sure, but moreish.

We're rather fond of the charmingly simple aesthetic, which finds comic value in the shapes' range of expressions. The same can't be said for the soundtrack, whose jaunty themes are either forgettable or mildly annoying



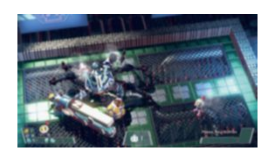
Super Bomberman R

You have to admit, it's a tempting pitch. A long-forgotten hero making an opportune return; an all-time multiplayer classic revived and reimagined for an irresistibly social new console at launch. With the remaining Switch lineup looking a shade on the slender side – Link's magnificent new adventure aside – *Super Bomberman R* would at first glance appear to be the ideal second game. Don't be fooled. This overpriced confection isn't *Act Zero* bad, but it sits worryingly close to that end of the quality scale, peering vainly at the sublime SNES and Saturn versions far off in the distance.

The kernel of the game remains: four (or eight) diminutive heroes must battle across a maze, placing bombs to destroy blocks and eventually one another, the winner being the last Bomberman standing. Anyone who perishes in a blast can exact revenge by firing bombs from carts that run on rails surrounding these square arenas, a successful hit swapping them back in at the expense of their victim. And to chivvy things along, spiked blocks will descend from the heavens as time starts to run out, forcing the remaining players to occupy an ever-narrowing area until the pressure becomes too much and a victor is declared.

Story missions can be tackled in co-op, which at least speeds things up. Regular enemy AI can be outrageously dumb; bosses, however, present a wearyingly attritional challenge when you're playing on your own

Developer Konami Digital Entertainment, HexaDrive
Publisher Konami Digital Entertainment
Format Switch
Release Out now



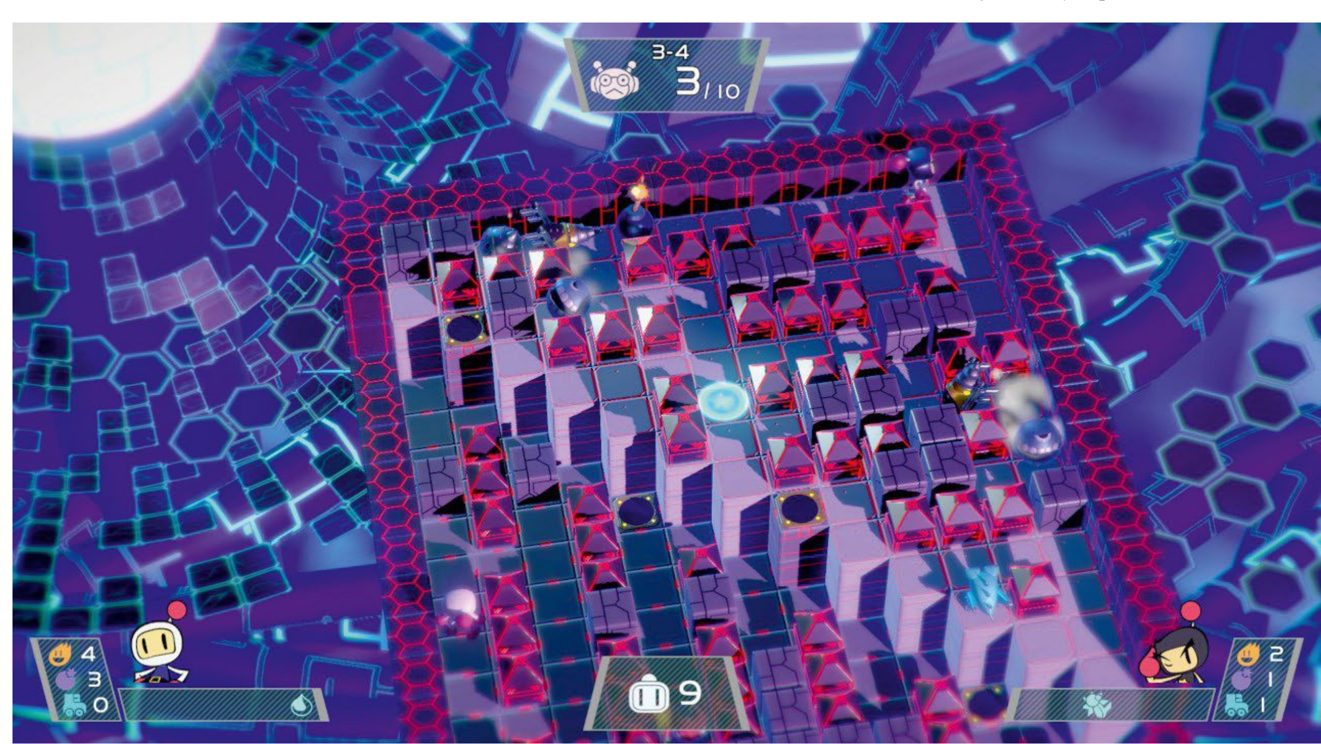
BUMMER, MAN

Story mode pairs a bizarre, tilted pseudo-isometric perspective with a busy art style that makes the action hard to read, particularly when it comes to judging different elevations. Missions set uninspired goals – defeat all enemies, press three switches, survive for two minutes – while each world concludes with two clumsy boss encounters. Curiously, despite being graded for your performance, you can't replay any worlds until you've finished the lot. And in between, you're forced to endure interminable, unfunny cartoon cutscenes.

Tellingly, the Old-School map is the pick of the stage options, with most of the rest proving either dull or gimmicky. Medieval sees four 3x3-tile castles obscure the action beneath; Magnetic Sphere has the dubious novelty of horseshoe magnets that suck bombs toward them and rotate 90 degrees with every blast. Junkyard, which features moving platforms that allow you to access a cramped central zone, is perhaps the best of the rest. We might be more forgiving were the character movement not strangely off: from sluggish at the outset to skittish when you've accumulated a few speed-up bonuses then try to turn a corner, only to see your avatar bump uselessly into the level geometry. A Story mode (see 'Bummer, man') feels like a slog after 20 minutes, while online matches are bedevilled by lag.

Luckily for Konami, it's impossible to entirely ruin *Bomberman*. In spite of everything, you'll likely be able to wring some fun out of it in Battle mode when you're all suffering the same handicaps. Yet that only testifies to the durability of the original concept, rather than any of the embellishments found here. Seemingly slapped together in haste and without much care, it's a cynical piece of work, destined to leave those holding a nostalgic fondness for earlier entries wondering whether *Bomberman* was really all they remembered. This is a cheap game with an expensive price tag, and there's nothing remotely super about it.







Catherine

How an esoteric relationship drama became gaming's unlikeliest esport

By Chris Schilling

Developer/publisher Atlus **Format** 360, PS3 **Release** 2011

Singledom versus marriage; lust versus love; freedom versus responsibility; blue sheep versus orange sheep. Of all the conflicts in *Catherine*, it's unlikely Atlus ever imagined the last of that list would be the one to keep the game relevant some six years after its original release. In fairness, critics missed it, too, focusing on the game's unusually mature, frank and nuanced examination of fidelity and temptation – and the questionable treatment of its two female leads, Catherine and Katherine.

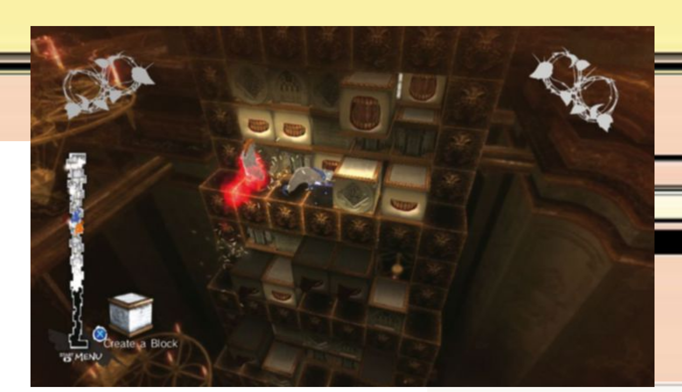
The story follows Vincent, a shiftless commitment-phobe torn between settling down with his long-term squeeze and lusting after the twentysomething of the title. Its daytime segments offer an uncommonly subtle and well-shaded take on male friendship, and the chance to engage in text conversations with the two women in Vincent's life, with the player's choices determining the game's ending. It's understandable that these elements were the focus of discussion at the game's release, if only for their relative novelty. Yet they're not why people are still playing it.

Instead, it's *Catherine*'s other half that has ensured its longevity. Interspersed with his daily visits to the local bar, Vincent endures a series of nightmares symbolising his anxieties. These challenging, 3D-puzzle-platforming interludes task you with climbing a tower of blocks, pulling and pushing them to form stairways to the top before the stack falls away, sometimes while pursued by menacing bosses. These sequences form the basis of the one-on-one multiplayer mode, Colosseum, which replaces Vincent with two sheep in blue and orange nightcaps and is only unlocked after finishing the game – meaning the many players who struggled with *Catherine*'s stern learning curve have never even encountered it. A reward for committed players, Colosseum was dismissed by many as a throwaway bonus mode.

But it's become anything but disposable to a group of fighting-game fans. Over the past six years *Catherine* has developed a small but passionate competitive scene, its growth all the more remarkable given the game's lack of online functionality. The origins of competitive *Catherine* are based in the fighting game community of Northern California, and specifically among a streaming group called Finest KO. As avid fans of anime-styled fighting games, *BlazBlue* player David Broweleit (who goes by the handle Dacidbro) and his friend Sean 'Coopa' Hoang sat down to play the game's twoplayer mode one evening in 2011, and realised it was no mere novelty when they found themselves still playing well into the small hours. The pair decided to learn the nuances of the game more thoroughly, and began to discuss rulesets for serious competition. Slowly, small communities sprang up across the globe, stretching as far as a group in Australia. Broweleit's tenacity eventually convinced Atlus to officially endorse a tournament, which found a place on one of gaming's biggest competitive stages, Evolution, in 2015.

It may not have been the biggest draw at Evo that year, but *Catherine*'s devoted following only seems unlikely if you've never seen it played competitively. From a spectator's point of view, it's an entertaining and unusual watch; unlike some esports, the action is comparatively easy to read, too. The goal quickly becomes clear – it's either down to who reaches the top of the tower first, or who is the last sheep standing – and there's a persistent threat to both players in that the bottom layer is constantly falling away. This lends the game an extra dramatic frisson even before you consider the environmental hazards specific to each stage.

And, despite the complaints in some quarters about the difficulty of the singleplayer sequences, it's a rare competitive game where the basics are relatively easy to learn. For starters, the controls could hardly be simpler: holding the X button lets you grab a block to push or pull, and you move around the tower using the analogue stick. With no complex input strings to learn, depth comes from reacting to situational changes, learning how to parse an ever-changing map at speed, and developing an ability to improvise on the fly as your opponent attempts to scupper your strategies. Invariably, the best players aren't simply looking to master the more advanced ▶



A round at the finals of Competitive Catherine Champs at EVO 2016 lasted all of three seconds – Toph baited Dacidbro into an unsuccessful drop-kick that saw him plunge to his death

techniques that are emerging within the competitive scene, but are learning to recognise an opponent's favoured approach and how best to counter it. The result is a psychological battle of a very different kind from that on offer in the story mode.

Though ostensibly a puzzle game, it's easy to see why *Catherine* has taken off in fighting-game circles, since many of the same principles apply. Indeed, its players have adopted familiar terminology for key moves and features. Take combos, for example. As two sheep can't occupy the same space, moving into your opponent when you're both standing on the same level will cause them to fall down. Dropping down onto them from above, meanwhile (a drop kick, in the community's parlance), will cause them to fall onto a lower block; if there's nothing to fall onto, they'll plummet to their doom. The recovery time of the sheep that's kicked takes a split-second longer than the time it takes to jump down, allowing the kicker to repeat the move. That's your basic combo, and a perfect illustration of the advantage of the higher ground in competitive *Catherine* play.

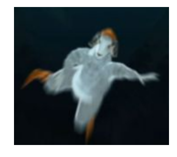
Naturally, there are counters to this, which means combos always carry an element of risk. When an opponent is above you, you can push or pull the block they're standing on. Since you're invincible while pushing – but, crucially, not pulling – a block out from a comboing player, this move has become known as a dragon punch. The alternative is to pull a block out from underneath an opponent, which doesn't convey temporary invulnerability, but results in a brief period of landing lag for the fallen sheep. This allows the puller to quickly climb over the block and stomp their opponent down a layer.

As with any good competitive game, the community has collectively discovered and shared several advanced techniques. Climb-cancelling is one, performed by hitting the grab button mid-animation to bait attacks from opponents. Drop kicks can also be cancelled, allowing you to pull off the move without leaving your current block, though the timing is trickier. Alongside these are a number of curious effects that result from specific circumstances. Altered State occurs when a player attempts a cancel to negate their landing recovery; the next time they drop down to clamber around a row of blocks, the cancellation will finish and they'll fall. Meanwhile, Sketchy State (named after *Catherine* player Maester-Sketches, who discovered it) will happen if a sheep hanging down from a block at the back of the stack falls and recovers. The next time they're hit, they'll remain frozen, allowing opponents to move into their space and pin them – a circumstance that can only normally occur when they're pressed against a background block and fall down. Here, unusually, it makes a difference whether you're player one or two, with blue getting priority and winning the game if

THOUGH OSTENSIBLY A PUZZLE GAME, IT'S EASY TO SEE WHY CATHERINE HAS TAKEN OFF IN FIGHTING-GAME CIRCLES



Catherine's strangeness is undoubtedly part of its appeal. Like any niche game, it feels more personal to the relative few who do fall for it



TURTLE POWER

Any competitive game worth its salt should offer its players room to develop defensive strategies, and *Catherine* is no different. The sidle defence involves moving around the outside of the structure while hanging on. You're still occupying a space, and can't be hit with a pillow attack, and because you're not standing on a block, your opponent can't push the floor out from beneath you. Alternatively, you can try to command the top of a T-block shape. Finally, there's the 'option select': when a player pulls a block outwards with nothing behind them, they can knock down opponents when they drop into the hanging position.



Once the main focus, the story is now viewed as a training mode among pro players – you'll learn the fundamentals during the game, which can be honed against other players

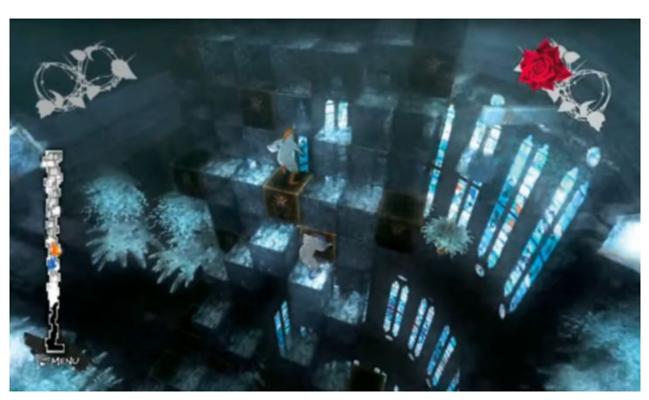
they stay until the bottom layer drops. Orange, meanwhile, has to climb up at just the right time to avoid falling, while giving blue too little time to recover.

That aside, Colosseum is incredibly well balanced for an unlockable bonus, and that extends to its use of items. Spawn rates increase the further behind one sheep is, enabling some dramatic, eleventh-hour comebacks. Juice bottles, for example – referred to here as X-Factor, a term borrowed from a comeback mechanic in *Marvel Vs Capcom 3* – allow players to climb two blocks at a time instead of one. The create-a-block item is equally powerful, not only offering you a way out of seemingly unrecoverable situations, but potentially allowing you to crush opponents, too.

Still, over time it's become apparent that not all of the nine stages are capable of withstanding the rigours of top-level play – three have been officially banned for restricting potential strategies. Inquisition is considered too compact, centralising the action so it devolves into a crude pillow fight; the ninth and final arena, The Empireo, is thought to have too many random elements, limiting tactical play and reducing the possibility of trailing players making a comeback. Prison Of Despair is a little different: one strategy, involving an immediate descent to a set of lower blocks that can be pushed to topple the tower, is so overpowered that a gentleman's agreement was established, allowing the stage to feature in the last set of the Evo 2016 final between Broweleit and Kris 'Toph' Aldenderfer, a pro gamer best known among the *Super Smash Bros Melee* community.

Broweleit acknowledged Aldenderfer's popularity as a shot in the arm for competitive *Catherine* after his tense final-round victory, and concluded the livestream with an impassioned plea for players to create their own local scenes. "I know you guys love *Catherine*," he said. "You're still here, so let's make it a worldwide game: let's give [Atlus] no excuse not to give us a *Catherine 2* in the future." A sequel seems unlikely: the game may have sold above expectations, but any follow-up would need more than a niche group of highly skilled players to make it viable. Still, the underdog spirit that's sustained competitive *Catherine* so far may yet be enough to keep this bizarre but quietly wonderful game alive. ■

Quadrangle's slippery ice blocks make it a difficult stage to get to grips with in every sense. Strong building techniques are required, and it's likely to suit anyone with a robust defensive game







JAMES LEACH

Postcards From The Clipping Plane

Conveniently ignoring the serious side of videogame development



If the Mona Lisa could be 20 per cent larger, or The Big Lebowski half an hour longer, would it improve them?

Remember the days when as a developer, we would actually finish making the game? I'm talking about the (usually dreadful) good old days, when we could literally do no more. Something vital inside had reached the number 255 and nothing else was possible. Off to the duplicators it went.

Of course, things are hugely better now, but we are faced with the conundrum of deciding when we're done. It's why we have milestones, deadlines, alphas and golds and all that. We now stop developing when we have run out of time, or, if we're lucky, when we have ticked every item on the list in the design document. Or if we're unlucky, when the money starts to run out. But whatever the reason, calling a halt to the creative process is not unique to the world of games, and it doesn't have to feel unsatisfying, although sometimes that's unavoidable.

Never fear, however. We live in an age of patches if things are truly screwed, and downloadable content if we just want to keep going. DLC is the curse and the blessing of our age. If you have a game engine capable of dealing with more and more missions, levels or scenarios, you've done the hard part and whether you charge for the extras or not, you're keeping your game growing, and probably still selling well without anything like the effort it took to make in the first place.

All this just reinforces the current status of games as amorphous franchises. They're expandable exercises in sequel-spawning branding and merchandise and it's what the public want. It's certainly what we're giving them, so they must. I nearly typed LOL at the end of that last sentence, but pulled myself up as this is a magazine. However, isn't it true that the best pieces of creative endeavour are those that actually get declared finished? If you could download extra tracks to add to your favourite album, would you want to? Even if they were by exactly the same lineup who made that album in the first place? If the Mona Lisa could be 20 per cent larger, or The Big Lebowski half an hour longer, and all you had to do was click to add the extra content, would it improve them?

I might have once worked for a developer who, in a rush to get a relatively bug-free product out before the end of whichever quarter is the important one, ended up culling a host of features from the game. There was understandable dismay from those who'd spent time working on the lost content. The solution was as cynical as it was ingenious; the game came out with, inevitably, bugs and glitches. A patch was promised that fixed these. But this patch was delayed so some of the dropped features could be polished and included in it. 'This is good,' you're thinking, 'they've mended the game and added some more stuff to it. I like these people and wish them well.' But when you consider the reality of the matter, what had happened was the company had failed to make the game they wanted, with all the features they were going to include. They then released it in a flawed state. And then tried to look generous and benevolent by fixing the bugs and problems they shouldn't have had in the first place, and bestowing to their adoring masses extra content, which should have been there in the first place too. There is, it turns out, a difference between always leaving them wanting more and not giving them what they want in the first place.

There do have to be deadlines, of course. And they don't have to be to the detriment of the thing being rushed to completion. A degree of urgency is highly desirable within the creative process, and some of the greatest accomplishments ever have been bashed out while impatient feet are tapping somewhere. And Parkinson's Law, telling us work expands to fill the time allotted to it, holds water most of the time. If there's ever been a videogame signed off significantly before its due date, I'd like to play it. And if there has and I did, on principle I'd complain about something in it, because if they finished early, they should've polished it more and finished on time.

So, what's the upshot here? Firstly, as we're all ultimately going to cark it, we have to accept that everything we do is to a time constraint. And also that some games should just get finished and played for a bit and everyone just walks away. No DLC, no sequels, no expansion packs. The people who make these can just go and do something new. And finally, here's a first; you've just read something that has discussed deadlines and hasn't once used that quote on the subject by Douglas Adams.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer whose work features in games and on television and radio

Illustration **Box Kite Curve**



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